Martin Magnus, Planet Rover

William F Temple

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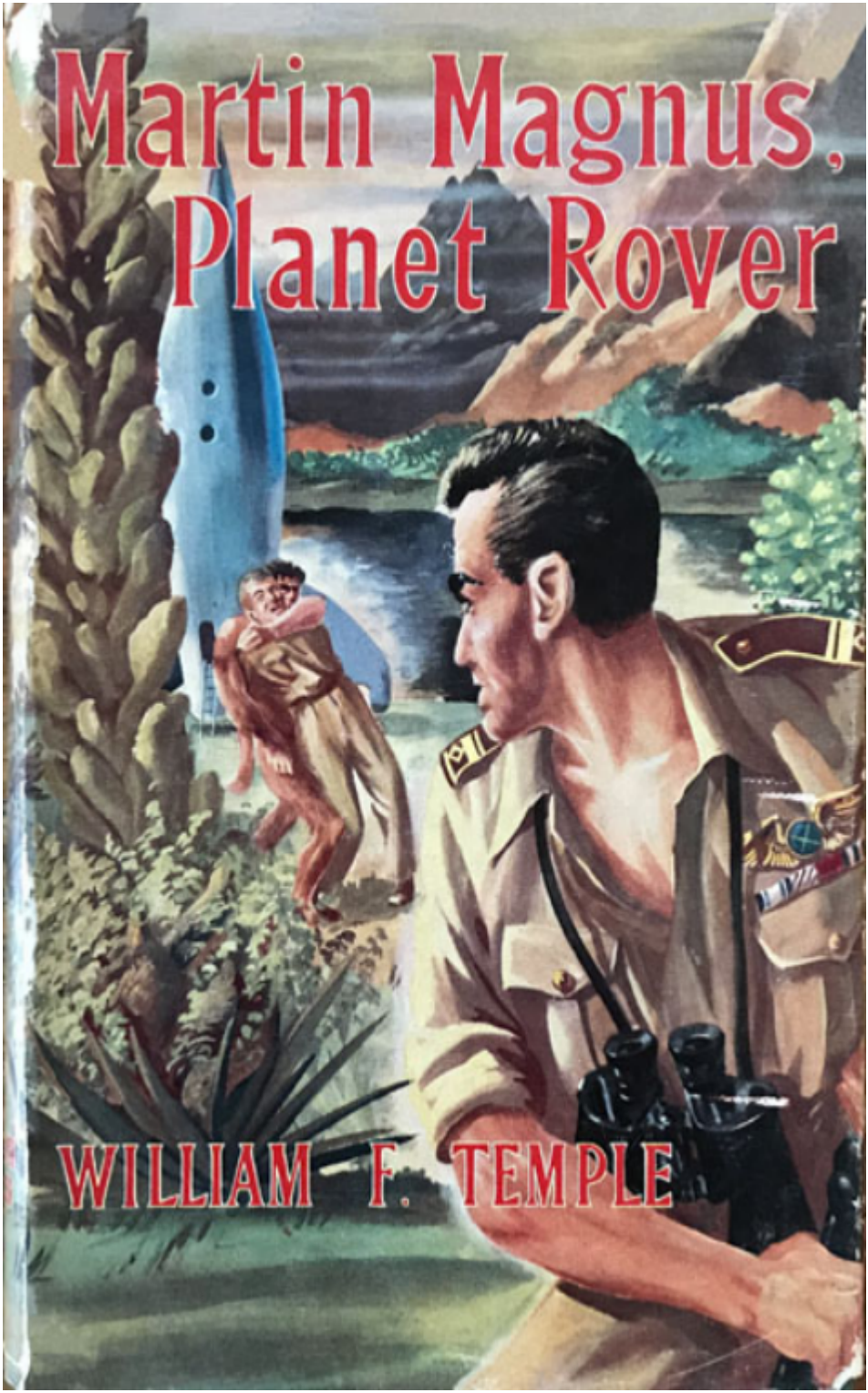
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by

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

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For
DAD

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Obvious printer's errors have been corrected. Hyphenation and accentuation have been standardised, all other inconsistencies are as in the original. The author's spelling has been maintained.

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I have not come across any official website for these indications. A colleague pulled these from notes he made while doing book scans himself. I think they came from a Usenet post.

1

SEND FOR MAGNUS!

IN the radar and radio-control room of Lunar Base One three men were looking at the greenly glowing radar screen above the console. At the console itself a sweating technician fingered the control knobs, knowing a miracle was expected of him. He also knew he wasn't a lucky man, and the hit and miss game he was playing with the controls was certain to be all miss and no hit. He wasn't likely to hit upon the gremlin which had got into the radar tracker.

He was uncomfortably aware of the Base Commandant and his Adjutant watching him just as grimly as they were watching the screen. He prayed for the return of Chief Radar Engineer Jenkins.

If the miracle was denied him, the prayer was answered. The door opened, and all three men swung round to look hopefully at the entrant. But Jenkins's fat face lacked its usual smile. That was sufficient answer.

Nevertheless, the Commandant inquired: "Well, Jenkins?"

"No go, sir. I've checked every yard of the wiring. It's sound. I'm willing to swear there's nothing wrong with the tracker."

"You're quite sure? There's nothing more you can do?"

"I've tried everything I know. I've had some troublesome double images before, but never one so obstinate as this."

There seemed to be nothing else for anyone to say. The

gaze of all four converged slowly on the screen. To the uninformed it showed nothing remarkable—just two bright and roughly circular patches of the same size, close together in the centre of the screen. But the men had been waiting weeks for one of those patches to appear—and when it came it was unaccountably a twin.

Presently the Adjutant ventured cautiously, because he felt the suggestion wouldn't be welcome: "Perhaps we'd better send for Magnus, sir."

The Commandant glared at him. But the glare was an act. Secretly, the Commandant had been waiting for someone to make this suggestion. "Send for Magnus!"—it always cropped up sooner or later, on Earth, Moon, Mars, or in space itself, to the mortification of top officials of all kinds, be they seasoned spaceship captains, council members of the Scientific Bureau, tough undersea men, colonial administrators, or specialists who prided themselves that they were the cock of their particular walk.

It wasn't merely that they hated to admit to helplessness, that a situation had got beyond them. That was likely to happen to anyone. For that reason the Special Investigation Department of the Scientific Bureau existed—to send help when needed, anywhere in the explorable solar system. The S.I.D. men were good—all picked men. They all had at least two science degrees, and were jacks-of-all-trades. Above all they were required to have initiative, resource, courage, and persistence. They were the commandos in the battle humanity was fighting for its mere existence.

Unfortunately for officialdom, Martin Magnus was by far the most able of this band of supermen. When the S.I.D. itself was baffled, the familiar suggestion began to be heard in the panelled committee rooms and the austere laboratories of the tall white building on the west side of

Trafalgar Square: “Send for Magnus!”

And Magnus hated to be sent for. To dodge the summons he had been known to hide, to sham illness, and even to prevaricate. But once he had been dragged out on a job, his grumbles began to subside. And when he got his teeth really into the mission, he wouldn’t let go. The officials who had persuaded him into the chase could now go blue in the face trying to call him off. He would not be called off, least of all by officialdom.

For Magnus also hated officialdom. He gave no reasons and perhaps had none—merely emotions generated by unhappy experiences long ago and consciously forgotten. But, certainly, where officials were concerned he had a chip on his shoulder as large as his head.

So, because he was more able than they, and because he could make them look small if he chose—and often he chose—most officials were to some extent scared of him, and so inclined to address him harshly.

The Commandant was no exception. But he was worried about his extra responsibility for the preparations for the first manned spaceship trip to Venus. It was unfair. Bruce was nominally in charge of that, and Bruce had been called back to Earth by the Scientific Bureau for a final briefing and for the selection of his crew. It was also stupid timing. Here was the sampler rocket returning from Venus—a day overdue at that—with no reception committee, so to speak, except himself and his staff. As though he hadn’t enough on his hands through his full-time job of running Base One.

He asked the radar operator: “Distance?”

“A trifle over five thousand eight hundred miles, sir.”

Time was short. He would have to send for Magnus.

Frowning, he dialled the number of Magnus’s room, and flipped the transmitting switch of the Visi. He watched

the instrument's small screen. It remained unlit, dead. A voice answered tiredly from the loudspeaker beneath it: "What is it now, Commandant?"

"You haven't switched on your Visi transmitter, Magnus," said the Commandant, testily.

There was a husky chuckle. "I never do if there's no need. You know what I look like. I'm no beauty. You don't have to have me in a picture frame."

Magnus's voice was not musical. It had the hoarse uncertain quality of a lad's voice at the time of breaking, and it was liable to leap from a growl to a squeak. Also, it was noticeably not deferential.

"I should have thought that, as a matter of common courtesy—" began the Commandant angrily, failed to find words to finish the sentence, and became incoherent. It added fuel to his fire to realize that his flushed, glowering face was perfectly visible to Magnus, who doubtless was watching it with amusement. Furiously, he jabbed off the switch of his own transmitter.

"You were saying about courtesy?" asked Magnus, insinuatingly.

"Never mind. We've sighted the sampler rocket."

"So I was informed an hour ago."

"Yes, but now that we can see it properly we're getting a double image of it."

"Then you're not seeing it properly."

The Commandant swallowed. The matter was important, so he swallowed again—his pride this time—and tried tact.

"Look, Magnus, be a good guy and come and take a peek at it. We've got to concentrate upon one of the reflections in order to guide the thing in to land. If we choose the wrong one, and try to land the shadow instead of the substance, then the real rocket will likely smash

itself among the mountains heaven knows where. Then the Venus trip will be put back a year at least."

"Jenkins is your man, not me. I don't know a radar tracker from a jelly bean."

This protestation of ignorance was an old dodge of Magnus's, and the Commandant ignored it.

"Please," he asked, though it all but broke his heart.

"Okay," said Magnus, with surprising promptness. "I'll be along."

A couple of minutes later his lean, gangling form bent over the radar operator's shoulder, and the operator felt that a weight had been lifted from him. "Distance, four thousand, two fifty miles, sir," he volunteered.

"Don't 'sir' me, son," said Magnus, mildly.

The operator grinned weakly and did not resent the "son" even though Magnus looked younger than he. For Martin Magnus looked to be in his mid-twenties. Yet it seemed unlikely that he could be, for he'd been a name for over five years, and apparently had been most places and done most things.

Magnus appeared now to be thrusting his thin face, with its narrow brown eyes and narrow beak of a nose, into every corner of the console, scanning the meters and peering through inspection ports. His bony, large-jointed fingers did a sort of skeleton dance over the switches, knobs, buttons, and levers. For a man who knew nothing about radar trackers, he conveyed a surprisingly convincing impression of knowing just what he was doing.

Chief Radar Engineer Jenkins watched with lively interest. He knew all the trouble-shooting tests the makers had listed in the maintenance book for the equipment. Now he saw them run through at twice the speed he could do them, and another series of tests begin which were not in the book.

Magnus began humming in a tuneless way the doleful "Vecchia Zimarra" from *Bohème*, though probably no one, in or out of the opera house, would have recognized it. A corncrake might have responded, under the impression that its mate was calling.

Then he stopped humming, slid his limp hands into the pockets of his jeans, and announced: "Nothing wrong with this set-up."

"Then how do you explain the two images?" asked the Commandant.

"Simply enough. They're there because there are two bodies reflecting them," said Magnus, without turning. "They're travelling side by side, half a mile apart, in this direction."

"Do you mean that the sampler rocket has broken in two?"

"That's not impossible. And we can't detect it by measurement because we can only see them tail on—or nose on—to us. But we'll know for sure in a few minutes."

"How?"

Magnus explained patiently, as though to children: "When the radar altimeter in the sampler records a distance of three thousand miles from the Moon, the rocket will start firing automatically—if it's still in one piece—to brake its descent. So we'll be able to distinguish it from the other object, which will have nothing to check its speed. If there's no sign of differing speeds, then the sampler has indeed broken apart—for the firing circuit runs all over the ship and will have broken also."

"Of course," said the Commandant, and the Adjutant's expression cheered.

"Unless," said Magnus, with a mischievous grin, "it's not the sampler at all, but a huge meteor that's split in two: they often do, you know."

It was comic to see the faces of the Commandant and Adjutant fall simultaneously.

"B-but," stuttered the Commandant, "it can't be. The coincidence is too great. After the ten months' round trip, the sampler appeared exactly where we expected it, right on orbit—"

"But a day late," pointed out Magnus.

"I don't believe it's a meteor," said the Commandant.

"Neither do I," said Magnus, calmly. "It's travelling far slower than the slowest of meteors."

"Distance, three thousand miles," said the operator, and at once Magnus was at his side noting and comparing meter readings.

"It's slowing," he said, presently.

"Which one?" It was almost a chorus.

"Both," said Magnus, beaming on them all. Everyone stared at him as though he had suddenly appeared from nowhere. "They're both decelerating at the same rate," he amplified. But that didn't diminish their astonishment.

"The sampler has only one jet. They can't both use it," said the Adjutant, the first to recover.

"How do you explain it, Magnus?" demanded the Commandant.

Magnus produced a wafer of gum and started to chew it. "I can't," he said, muffledly, and turned his whole attention on the screen and meters. The operator became agitated and pulled at his sleeve. "I've got to take over radio control of her in two minutes. *Which one do I land?*"

Magnus patted his shoulder encouragingly. "Don't worry, son—leave it to me. Move over."

He sat himself beside the slightly trembling operator. He chewed gently, like a thoughtful cow, his gaze shifting from the chronometer to the speed indicator dials, up to the

screen, and back. One thin hand was poised like that of a gunfighter ready for the draw. The fingers of the other hand danced a little jig on the panel.

Suddenly, he ceased to move, ceased even to chew, and stared hard at the reticulated screen.

Then, as the chronometer hand touched the decisive second, he pressed a white button—all that was needed to bring the sampler rocket off automatic pilotage and put it at the mercy of the radio knobs beneath his fingers.

They knew he had chosen, and were burning to ask which—and why. But no one dared to disturb the concentration of an operator during the first ticklish minutes of guiding down a ship. However, they hadn't to contain their impatience even for thirty seconds. Magnus resumed chewing, and told them: "The one on the right is the sampler. It's still dead on course. The other veered off half a degree before the zero pip. It's nearly two degrees off now—look for yourselves."

They looked and saw that the two patches on the screen were noticeably farther apart than they had been. The one on the left was drifting slowly towards the edge of the screen.

"I don't know what that is nor where it's going, and at the moment I don't care a cuss," said Magnus. "We've got to keep tracking the sampler, close to."

No one demurred. They knew it would have been useless if they had. Magnus had taken over things here as naturally as an eagle mounts the sky, and there was no resentment even in the Commandant's acquiescence.

They watched the image of the sampler rocket as it descended slowly, sitting on its tail, through the last few hundreds of miles towards the Moon. Like all true interplanetary rockets these days it was an atomic rocket. The atomic rocket had existed in theory for nearly half a

century, waiting upon the solution of one practical problem: the instantaneous and completely efficient transference of heat from the atomic pile, or reactor, to the propellant.

There was no difficulty about providing fuel: the breeder reactors first built in the nineteen-fifties had been perfected, and created as they worked even more fuel than they used. And although liquid hydrogen, ammonia, and methane had been tested as propellants, among others, it was found that ordinary water promised as good a performance as anything.

Then, just as true air flight began with the invention of the internal combustion engine, so true interplanetary flight (as distinct from sallies into space in chemical rockets) began with the invention of the Bridge Heat Induction Reactor, which in turn owed its advent to the discovery, in the realm of physics, of "sympathetic molecules."

The full one hundred per cent of the heat generated by the Bridge Reactor was instantly transmitted to the water, which literally exploded out of the chamber in a great jet of super-heated and slightly radio-active steam. The reaction, of course, propelled the ship with the same force in the opposite direction. Basically, atomic rockets were nothing more than steamships of space.

It was an atomic ship which conquered the Moon, on which there were now two bases, airtight dwellings housing the teams of surveyors, geologists, miners, chemists, and other workers who were systematically prospecting the Moon's mineral and chemical resources.

It was an atomic ship which first landed on Mars and established the small colonies of Earthlings who were beginning the same fight against the aridity of that planet which their kin were winning against the deserts of Earth.

But both times an unmanned scout rocket went ahead

of these expeditions and spied out the land. Before the lunar landing was made, an atomic scout orbited the Moon, relaying through its TV telescopic-camera close-ups of the hitherto unseen back of the satellite.

In the case of Mars, the distance was too great for a successful direct TV transmission. So that scout filmed the Martian surface, and brought back nearly a mile of microfilm from which a tremendous map was evolved.

With Mars, too, the first sampler rocket was tried out. Although its servo-mechanisms were highly complicated and its electronic "brain" very delicate and susceptible to shock, it did its job without a hitch. It landed in one of the areas of blue-green vegetation at Syrtis Major, and proved itself to be the complete conscientious robot. It fired a full circle of rockets, attached to wires, at different ranges deep into the gritty soil. They had open noses which admitted the resisting soil into containers. The moment the robot windlasses began to haul the rockets back, an automatic mechanism sprang the nose apertures shut.

Spiked drums, magnetic and radio-directed, were sent rolling over the topsoil, impaling specimens of plants or whatever happened to lie in their path, attracting any loose metallic objects, and brought back their collections to the waiting robot ship.

Meanwhile, the ship was thrusting a long sting from its tail into the ground—a diamond drill that bit deep into the rocky layers beneath and sampled them. And pumps sucked in draughts of the atmosphere for analysis back on Earth. During both the descent and ascent recording instruments busily noted the density of the atmosphere at different heights and collected data about ionized layers.

So even before men set foot on Mars they had a rough idea of what to expect there.

Now the first expedition to Venus was being planned—

indeed, plans were far advanced. Out at Lunar Base Two the great atomic ship, *Archimedes*, stood waiting, its propellant tanks full. Waiting for the return of the sampler rocket. Waiting for its final loading and trimming. Waiting for its crew and captain. Waiting for the take-off to Venus.

But Venus provided more problems than ever Mars did, for it was wreathed completely and eternally in deep cloud. No astronomer had ever glimpsed a speck of its surface. The first automatic scout rocket which was sent to survey it penetrated the cloud belt in an attempt to film what lay below it. But apparently the clouds reached right to the ground, for the scout crashed.

The second scout was limited to circling the planet above the clouds and directing radar pulses down through them and filming the echoes shown on its screen. In this way a rough map of the contours of the land was pieced together. There were some fairly regularly shaped patches which might have been cities—or natural formations. But the most amazing fact revealed was that Venus was a planet without seas. In fact, if the sketchy map could be relied upon, there was but one solitary lake on all Venus. It was only four miles across at its widest part, and lay in a hollow among mountains. Whether it was a natural lake caused by rainfall or whether it was a lake of a liquid other than water was an open question.

To answer that question, among others, a sampler rocket had been sent, much on the lines of the one which had proved such a success on Mars.

Until the second scout had returned, it wasn't even known whether Venus rotated on its axis or not. However, the scout revealed that it did—once every 11 hours, 55 minutes, and 21 seconds: twice as fast as Earth.

So electronic calculators were able to work out the precise orbital path, speed, and timing for the sampler

rocket to be set down on the shore of the Venusian lake, close enough for the robot ship to thrust a pipe across the ground and into the liquid. A pump should then operate and suck a fair sample into an acid-proof tank.

A lot depended upon that lake containing just water. For a large atomic ship, carrying a crew, even starting from the Moon, as was planned, would use up every drop of its own water propellant merely in getting to Venus and making a landing there. To take off for the return, it must be able to refill its water tanks on Venus.

So the return of the sampler rocket, which had been sent from the Moon, was awaited with some anxiety. On its offerings depended the whole plan of the conquest of Venus.

Down, down, down it came, ever more slowly, balanced by its gyroscopes on the great invisible jet of steam from its tail. Down towards the wide plain, the Mare Nubium, from whence it had started. All the way it was cradled in the gentle hands of Magnus.

Now it was hardly moving, and the solid line of the Moon's horizon crept up the screen to meet it.

Presently, they touched, and in a few moments Magnus relaxed.

"Landed," he said. "Here's your booty from Venus."

The Commandant sighed. "Good man," he said.

Magnus pencilled some calculations on a scribbling block, tore off the sheet and handed it to the Commandant. "Fifteen miles out on the Mare," he said. "You can't see it from here, but you can from the top of the Wall if you want to go up and take a bearing on it. But to save you the trouble, that's the bearing—if you care to accept my figures."

"I'll accept 'em," said the Commandant. "You're coming out there with us, of course?"

"No. I don't want to get mixed up in any part of the Venus exploit. Venus to me is just a threat—another darned uncomfortable spot I'm bound to be sent to sooner or later. The later, the better. All I'm living for now is to get back to Earth on the very next rocket."

"If that's the way you feel, why don't you resign from the S.I.D.?" asked the Commandant, gruffly.

"I can't," said Magnus, moodily. "I was fool enough to sign on for twenty years. I must have been mad."

The Commandant and the Adjutant looked at each other and mirrored expressions of bewilderment and some disgust. They went out together without another word.

The moment they were gone, Magnus winked solemnly at the radar operator, and said: "D'you mind if I play your box of tricks again?"

"Go ahead. You play it rather better than I do."

Magnus's hands moved over the console. He was setting the tracker to make great sweeps around the starry lunar sky. He hadn't much hope, but there still might be a chance of picking up again that mysterious object which had been chumming the sampler rocket back through lonely space.

But, after all, it was too late. He could get no echo from anywhere in the sky. Even the meteors seemed to have gone to bed.

He switched off the tracker and pondered a while. The object had been roughly the same diameter as the sampler, and that was quite twenty feet. Because it had been coming straight towards the tracker it had been impossible to mark its length. It could have been much shorter than the sampler—or even longer.

Where had it gone? Back whence it came? Or had it landed somewhere else on the Moon? Or shot past the Moon to Earth? Or past both and onwards into trackless

space?

It could have landed quite near. It might even be visible from the observatory at the top of the Wall. Again, the chance was slight but he decided to take it.

He nodded cheerfully to the operator, and went out into the electric-lit corridors which had been hewn out of the rock.

Despite their felt covering, the leaden soles of his boots thumped noisily on the hard floor. The gravity here was only a sixth of Earth's, and without such compensatory weights you couldn't take a stride without the danger of rising to meet the ceiling with your head. And the ceiling was hard rock also.

He passed the doors of many other rooms, mostly offices which also were rock chambers, but reached the elevator shaft without meeting a soul. It was an open cage, and on his solitary trip upwards he could see the wiring running up inside the 600-foot shaft to the observatory and the radar mast which surmounted the cliff. He thought of the weary, fruitless task Jenkins had had in checking every yard of it.

At the top he stepped out into the domed cylinder of the observatory.

Cross, a scrawny midge of a man, was the only astronomer on duty. He was slipping a new plate into the camera of the giant reflecting telescope. Cross liked it here, for astronomy was his life, and here he could live and breathe it most of the time. For although at certain angles the sun's glare from the rocks dimmed the stars, there was always some part of the black, richly jewelled sky he could work on. And during the sunless fortnight-long lunar nights the heavens became wholly his oyster. Never were they clouded, as they were on Earth. Nor did any atmospheric currents make the stars seem to wobble infuriatingly, as

they did on Earth, for the Moon's atmosphere was negligible. He could use the telescope at full power all the time.

The only thing that troubled him was the insistence of the fools at the Scientific Bureau on demanding information about the moons of Jupiter, or Saturn, or the conditions on Mercury, or about other parts of this miserable little solar system, while he himself was burning to map the farthest galaxies and get a picture of the cosmos entire—if he could.

If Cross had little time for the solar system, he had less for the inhabitants of it, and beyond a vague nod he ignored Magnus. Not that Magnus had come for a chat—he had his own preoccupations.

The observatory had wide windows set in its circular wall and Magnus made the round of them slowly. The views were magnificent. For the observatory was set on the brink of one of the strangest features on the Moon—the Straight Wall.

The Wall was a tremendous cliff, in some places over 800 feet high, and always dropping sheerly along its sixty-mile length. Every yard of that length was as straight as a ruler. It lay near one edge of the Mare Nubium, distant some three hundred miles from the startling crater of Tycho, where a hundred bright rays began to spread radially for much longer distances across craters and mountains and plains.

The Wall was a marvellous natural fault in the lunar terrain. It was also a marvellous natural Lunar Base. For one thing, the Wall exposed to view and examination a great slice of the lunar crust, obviating the need to bore through the layers. For another, the Base could be tunnelled out horizontally at the foot of the cliff. This was far easier than having to excavate downwards and employ

heavy lifting gear.

Most of Lunar Base One was a honeycomb of tunnels and chambers in the lower part of the cliff, insulated against heat and cold and rendered airtight by the rock itself. The single narrow elevator shaft connected it with the observatory, which had to be set high to obtain an uninterrupted view of the sky. It had an uninterrupted view of a wide tract of the Moon also.

Behind, the distant peaks of the crater Thebit and the walled plain, Arzachel, indented the sable sky. To the south reared the Stag's Horn Mountains, where the Wall ended. All before stretched the Mare Nubium, the great plain across which the Commandant and the Adjutant were now journeying to investigate the sampler rocket from Venus. Out there, too, lay the broken crater of Birt, wherein moved sometimes one of the rare lunar mists.

Way out, exactly on the bearing he had calculated, Magnus saw a tiny, bright and steady gleam. It was the sun shining on the silvered hull of the sampler. But he wasn't seeking that.

His naked-eye survey of the surroundings yielded no fruit. So now he employed a four-inch refracting telescope, searching the baking lunar rock masses for miles around, hoping to glimpse something that normally wasn't there: the phantom companion of the sampler. But unless the thing were indeed a meteor, now a mere lump of rock lying among the other rocks, he saw nothing of it.

He bit his lip and scowled at the radar scanner on its short mast, fifty yards along the cliff verge. No, that wouldn't help. It could distinguish the solid from the not solid, but when it came to defining a solid against a solid background radar was practically useless.

He lifted his gaze to the Earth, a great shining half-moon in the Moon's eternal night sky, and his scowl

softened away. Cross was just removing the exposed plate from the big telescope's camera. On an impulse, Martin Magnus said: "Mind if I take a peek at Earth?"

Cross was intent upon getting the plate to the dark-room, hoping to discover yet another spiral nebula, and shook his head, looking like his name. Magnus took that to mean he didn't mind, and swung the camera away and replaced it with an optical eyepiece.

Then he let himself soak up Earth—more exactly, England. And more exactly, London. The Thames, shining like a silver snake beneath the cloud wisps, filled the telescope's field of view.

He narrowed the field, concentrating on the Charing Cross area. He picked out the white block of the Scientific Bureau building from all the other buildings in the vicinity, dwelt on it a while, then swung eastwards and to the south bank. From the maze of streets adjacent to the dockyards he chose the vein of the Old Kent Road, and wandered up and down it, visually—and in spirit. He loitered a long while on the corner of Sycamore Lane.

At length, when he felt something like a lump come into his throat, he left the 'scope abruptly and stuffed another wafer of gum in his mouth.

Then he saw, coming across the Mare, the tractor (with its caterpillar treads for getting over the rock spurs and the patches of deep dust) bearing the Commandant and his Adjutant within its sealed body. Doubtless the Venusian samples were stacked high behind them.

He watched it until it passed beneath the lip of the cliff. Six hundred feet below him now the tractor was grinding into the airlock at the entrance to the main tunnel.

He wasn't much interested in the conditions on Venus, but it occurred to him that, by one of those outside chances he was always having to try, there might be the shadow of

a clue to the nature of the mysterious object he sought. Now that he'd grasped the protruding end of a mystery, he wasn't going to let go until he'd unravelled something that made sense.

He stepped back into the elevator and dropped down to meet the returned travellers as fast as the laggard Moon would allow him to fall.

2

TWO STRANGE MESSAGES

HE found them at the Main Laboratory supervising the unloading of the canisters: the sampler rocket stored its gleanings in easily detachable canisters and tanks.

"Magnus, we have a mystery for you," said the Commandant. Beside him was a tank he was keeping apart from the containers the laboratory assistants were carrying into their domain. He tapped it gently with his toe.

Magnus regarded it. "Isn't that the liquid sample from the lake?"

"Well, it's the tank. But there's not a drop of liquid in it."

"What went wrong—the pump?"

"We examined the pump—it was okay," the Adjutant interjected.

"Evaporation?" queried Magnus.

"How could it be?—we haven't opened it. It's still sealed," said the Commandant.

Magnus lifted the tank a few inches. Something within clinked against the ceramic lining. Whatever it was, it was small and light, for the tank came up as easily as though it were empty.

"That's the mystery," said the Commandant. "What is it?"'

"A time bomb—the Venusians don't like us," said Magnus, humorously.

The Adjutant frowned. "It could be some sort of booby

trap—no joking. How did it get in there? How could the pipe have sucked it in without sucking liquid in at the same time? I suggest it could have been *put* in there—by someone or something unknown."

"It could," said Magnus. "On the other hand, maybe the pipe didn't quite reach to the lake and sucked in a twig, say, that happened to be lying around. There's only one way to find out."

He began to unscrew the plug where the pipe had fitted.

"Stop!" said the Adjutant, sharply. "You know the rules."

Magnus knew the rules. Sample canisters from strange planets might contain heaven knew what. A clod of earth might contain a million unknown bacteria fatal to man. A sample of planetary atmosphere might turn out to be poison gas. The Scientific Bureau ruled that all canisters must be opened by remote control in airtight cases—under strict laboratory conditions.

"All right," said Magnus. "I don't want to blow the place up. Let me take it out a couple of miles in the tractor. You've half a dozen more tractors."

"But there's only one Martin Magnus, I'm glad to say," said the Commandant. He saw the mockery at the back of those brown eyes, and decided on the instant. "We'll forget the rule-book just this once," he said, and bent to finish what Magnus had started. Soon the plug came away in his hand. He reached through with the other hand and fished about. At last it emerged grasping something about the size and appearance of a fountain pen—a short, thin black cylinder.

The Commandant examined it, tried to see if any part of it unscrewed, but it did not. He tried to rattle it, but it wouldn't rattle.

"Seems to me to be just a length sawn off a solid plastic

rod," he said. "Perfectly smooth. No marks on it. No sense to it. If it—"

The Commandant suddenly went still, holding the rod and gazing neither at it nor at anything else. He seemed to have been struck by some idea and was giving it plenty of consideration.

Presently he said, in a queer voice: "I want you both to come up to my office." To the Chief Chemist he said: "Send up written preliminary reports on all these samples just as soon as you can. And don't stop to do them in your best handwriting."

"Very good, sir."

The Commandant slipped the rod into his pocket and led the way. Magnus was at a loss, but because he was Magnus he refused to show it, and in response to the Adjutant's puzzled, interrogative glances merely chewed placidly.

In his office the Commandant swung suddenly on the Adjutant, produced the rod and said: "Just hold that a while, and don't try to think. And don't say anything."

The Adjutant obeyed. In a matter of seconds his face became as rapt as the Commandant's had been downstairs. Magnus, watching, decided that the rod was conveying a message, and wondered how.

"Now give it to Magnus," directed the Commandant.

Magnus took the slim thing. It was somewhat slippery and so one had to grasp it tightly—perhaps that was necessary to its function.

Magnus stood quietly, relaxed. The feeling grew on him gradually that he had meant to say something but had forgotten what it was. He strove to recover the elusive memory. The words lay tantalizingly just below the level of his conscious mind. When he momentarily gave up the pursuit, they seeped in.

But they were not words he had intended to say.

"*Our world is our world*" ran through his mind. And again: "*Our world is our world.*"

It took only the slightest of mental efforts to break loose from their mild spell. Magnus laid the rod on the Commandant's desk. At once, the repetitive thought ceased altogether.

"What did it convey to you?" asked the Commandant. Magnus told him.

"Much the same as to me, only I thought of it as 'Our place is our place,' " said the Commandant.

"To me it was 'Our habitat is our habitat,' " said the Adjutant.

"You always went in for the big words, Tom," said the Commandant, smiling briefly at him, "Well, the sense, gentlemen, remains the same. It seems to me that we've been warned off Venus. By whom? And do they know who we are?"

Magnus said: "I've an idea they don't know who we are any more than we know who they are. Venus is completely cloud-covered. Because of that, it may be that the inhabitants have never seen the stars, perhaps didn't know there were other worlds besides their own. Not until our sampler rocket came down from the clouds and started nosing around among them. Then they guessed it was the vanguard prospecting for more visitors to follow. So they popped the message in the shopping basket for us: 'Visitors Not Welcome.' Or maybe they thought of it another way: 'Invaders Not Welcome.' "

"They kept the sampler back for only a day," said the Commandant. "You mean to tell us that in that short time they deduced what it was, digested the idea that there was another world besides their own, and prepared this—this thought-message thing?"

“Perhaps they think and move more quickly than we do,” said Magnus. “Remember, they get through two days in the time Earth takes over one.”

The Commandant looked at him suspiciously, but Magnus kept his face grave. “H’m,” said the Commandant, “we must allow that they’re more advanced than us in some respects. Our science hasn’t produced anything like this.”

He picked up the thought-rod, wrapping it in his handkerchief. “It doesn’t work unless you’re actually touching it,” he reported, after a short bout of experimenting. “Any idea how it might work, Magnus?”

“Only crude ones. I should like to see inside it.”

“What do you expect to find there?”

“I expect nothing. Perhaps it’s as solid as it looks, and the thought has been applied in some way in the coating—it seems to have a slippery coating. Again, perhaps embedded inside it is a complete electronic set-up, a miniature electronic brain.”

“Brain?” echoed the Commandant.

“An elementary one. Basically, a thought is a released electrical charge. Each of us has in our own brain something like ten thousand million brain cells. Each cell is a nerve-end, and acts like a single simple relay switch. Thousands of them, snapping on and off, make up the electrical pattern we call a ‘thought.’ Maybe within this rod are set thousands of microscopic relays automatically snapping on and off to a set pattern—the pattern of its one and only thought.”

“Yes, but how do we receive it?” asked the Adjutant.

Magnus shrugged. “Perhaps the nerve-ends in our finger-tips pick up the electrical impulses. Thus they’re conveyed to our brain, and there cause our brain cells to repeat the pattern—perhaps through the Sympathetic

Molecules principle."

"Sounds almost plausible," said the Commandant.

"It may be rubbish," said Magnus. "The explanation might be quite different. It might lie in the realm of psycho-kinesis."

"Uh?"

"Long ago Dr Rhine, an American scientist, showed that inanimate matter can be affected by a human thought. The effect is very slight, so slight as to be useless. He called it the 'P.K. effect'—short for psycho-kinesis. Perhaps we don't have the right kind of matter on Earth. But supposing there's an element, unknown to us at present, which records and stores the electrical charge of a thought, and releases it by contact with the animal electricity in our bodies. And *this* is a sample of that element, found on Venus but not on Earth."

"I'm out of my depth," said the Commandant. "Talking about samples, I wonder how they're getting on downstairs? We should be getting the first bulletin soon."

"If there *are* any samples," said Magnus, with a slight grin.

"What do you mean?" asked the Adjutant.

"The Venusians didn't let us get away with a sample of their lake. Why should they let us take any other samples of their world? Why should they be that helpful when apparently they want us to leave them alone?"

"I don't know," said the Adjutant. "But I do know those other canisters are a darned sight heavier now than when they were put into the rocket. There must be *something* inside 'em."

"I'll find out," said the Commandant, reaching towards the Visi. Immediately, there was a knock at the door. "Come in," he called.

The Chief Chemist entered with a wad of notes.

"These are only brief reports, sir—pretty rough."

"Okay, George—nice timing." The Commandant took them and leafed through them.

Presently, he frowned. "H'm. Oxygen diluted by unknown but harmless inactive gas at ground level, pressure of one atmosphere almost exactly. That's handy. Yet thick density of carbon dioxide in upper levels. How's that, George? Carbon dioxide is a heavier gas than oxygen. So why's it lying above the oxygen?"

"I've no clear idea, sir. But it seems to have trapped the oxygen down there like—like a tent. A freakish condition, and it's hard to guess what caused it. Perhaps we'll never know."

"Um. The soil seems to be moderately fertile, so there must be some rainfall despite the strange lack of open water. The bacteria are familiar—and innocuous. A few roots and seeds, plants unknown. Granite floor. No evidence of artifacts—that doesn't mean a thing. We've got one Venusian artifact here, George, and a darned mysterious one too—I'll tell you about it later. Okay, let's have the full reports when you can. This is enough to go on with—ought to make the Bureau happy. Thanks."

The Chemist withdrew, looking relieved.

The Commandant dialled the Visi, and the exchange operator's inquiring face appeared. "Get me Doran, of the Scientific Bureau."

"Yes, sir."

As the European hemisphere was facing the Moon at this time, it was possible to operate the direct TV beam to London, instead of via the space-station relays. Soon, Doran's face appeared on the Visi screen, wobbling a little as though it were made of jelly, and riven fitfully by white streaks caused by the erratic streams of ions the sun cast through space.

Doran was the Chief of the Special Investigation Department.

His smile was made fiendish by the Visi distortion, but his voice was calm and clear. “Hello, Commandant. What luck with the samples?”

The Commandant made the most of his notes, and dwelt particularly on the thought-rod and its implications.

By the end of it, Doran’s smile had long faded. He commented: “Good—in parts. But I’m not too happy about that message. I’ll convene a council meeting. We’ve got to do some hard thinking here. I’ll call you back in a couple of hours. Meantime, get the fullest reports from your people on the samples. But don’t start anything else—and guard that thought-rod with your life.”

The screen went blank.

“I’d like to take that rod for examination,” said Magnus.

“You heard what Doran said,” snapped the Commandant. “It’s not to be touched until he gives his okay.”

“Then I’m going back to my bunk,” said Magnus, abruptly.

“All right, we shan’t want you.”

Creditably, it was a long while before they had to send for Magnus, But in the end there was no option. Some constituent of the soil sample defied the Chief Chemist’s attempts at analysis and they had to rope Magnus in on it. He had trouble with it too, but nailed it down eventually as something analogous to a substance known on Mars. They were trying to word it more precisely for the report, when Doran came on again.

“Had any Venusians dropping in for lunch yet?” he inquired.

“No, sir, it’s all quiet here,” answered the

Commandant.

"Good. Well, we've had the meeting. Sorry I'm a bit late calling back, but Bruce was a hundred miles away and we had to have him along. On the basis of the sample reports, he's quite happy to continue with the Venus expedition—rude messages from the natives notwithstanding. But we're not happy about the water situation. We can't carry the weight of machinery to extract it from the soil, even if we could do so in sufficient quantity. And as we've totally failed to establish that the lake is water, the council have decided not to land *Archimedes* on Venus, but instead put it in a close orbit around the planet."

"If I may say so, sir, I can't see how we'll learn much that way."

"Wait a moment, Commandant. We shan't land *Archimedes*, but there will be a landing on Venus all the same. It so happens that we have a small ferry rocket at Earth space-station Three—it's one of those two-man efforts. She's already fuelled up, so she can make the Moon from the space-station orbit. We're going to refuel her on the Moon and mount her on the nose of *Archimedes*. The plan then is to detach her in the Venusian orbit, and make a two-man landing near the lake. These men will investigate the lake. If it's water, they will radio back to *Archimedes* and give her the okay to land also. If the lake turns out to be nothing that can be used for propellant, then *Archimedes* will have to return without landing. Then for the next attempt we should either have to build a much bigger ship, capable of carrying enough propellant both ways—or devise a different kind of ship. I trust there's nothing in your more detailed reports which might veto these plans?"

"No, sir."

"Right—then let's have them."

The Commandant read them out quickly, knowing the tape was recording them at the Earth end for more leisurely study later. "Get it on the tape" was a rule that had become cliché at the Scientific Bureau.

Doran listened attentively, nevertheless, and at the end said: "Plenty to think about there. Have that thought-rod inspected carefully by someone who knows what he's doing. This is my busy day. There's a submarine volcano causing havoc to the plantations off Puerto Rico. The main Sahara canal is caving in again. And I've just had a message that one of the Spanish plantations is being attacked by sea monsters of some kind. Is that Magnus I see behind you? Let me talk to him—I think we're going to need him here."

"Magnus!" called the Commandant, sharply. Magnus, half-way through the door, paid no heed and closed the door behind him.

"Bring him back!" snapped the Commandant, and the Adjutant leaped to the door. Presently, he returned with Magnus.

"Didn't you hear me call you?" glowered the Commandant.

"No," said Magnus, innocently. "It's my catarrh. Makes me quite deaf sometimes, you know. I really must try an inhalant."

He blew his nose noisily.

"It's about time you thought up a new one, Magnus," said Doran's voice from the Visi. "That gag's wearing thin. So's my patience. Listen to me. Have you sorted out that spot of trouble for the Commandant?"

"Sure. He was only trying to cut across a seam instead of going with it. This lunar rock's funny stuff. You've got

to understand it."

"That's why we sent you. Apparently nobody else does understand it. Now, look, there's something fishy here going on under the sea—"

"Always is," interrupted Magnus, laconically.

"Feeble, feeble. Anyhow, we're puzzled about that last message I mentioned. The Spaniards tried the vibrator beam at random and killed something. Curious creature, and the most curious thing about it is that it's got a brain the size of a water melon. The species must be highly intelligent."

"That doesn't follow," said Magnus. "It might have known a lot—but intelligence is *using* what you know."

"If it knew a lot, it learnt it," said Doran. "And one can't learn without intelligence. We're up against something quite new here and I don't much like the look of it. I'm sending a rocket up for you in a couple of days. Mind you come straight back on it."

"But I'm due some leave," said Magnus, plaintively. "I've been gallivanting from the Moon to Mars, from Mars out to the asteroids, back to Mars, back to the Moon... I want a rest."

No rest for the wicked," said Doran, tritely, and switched off.

Magnus unwrapped another gum wafer and bit savagely at it. The Commandant and the Adjutant made a polite pretence of hiding their smiles, but were careful not to succeed.

"Okay," said Magnus, still savage. "Grin away. But I've an idea *you're* going to have some headaches here pretty soon. And I shan't be here to run around for you."

"What do you mean?" asked the Commandant, his smile vanishing a deal faster than the Cheshire cat's.

"Why do you suppose the Venusians permitted the

sampler to return? I'll tell you. Because they wanted to learn where it came from. So they shadowed it back in a spaceship—that was the second image we saw. By now they probably know quite a lot about our Lunar Bases, and they may be anywhere around here. Watching. Planning. And they mightn't be a bit friendly."

"If that really was a ship following the sampler, it could have been just a robot telemetering information back. If so, it'll be on its way back to Venus now," said the Commandant. But he was a little pale.

"Well, it didn't go straight back," said Magnus. "I searched the sky for it on the radar tracker. If it were returning, it couldn't have gone right out of range in the time. I'd have picked it up. So there's quite a chance it's somewhere around. There may be intelligent beings in it—they may already have left the ship, they may already be scouting around here. We've had it mostly our own way so far in our interplanetary travels. Man has been top dog—up till now. But there's a lot more of this solar system yet that we haven't explored, and maybe soon we'll be treading on someone's corns. And they won't like it. And they'll jump hard on our corns. With that happy thought, I leave you."

He clumped out, banging his leaden soles down extra hard.

Half a minute later, he was back.

"Well?" said the Commandant, coldly.

"I'd still like to examine that thought-rod. We must learn how it works."

The Commandant remained on his high horse. "If I need your assistance in the matter, I'll ask for it. It so happens that we have a first-class electronics man at Base Two. I'm quite sure he'll fathom it out."

"Hamilton?"

The Commandant nodded.

“He’s a good man,” said Magnus. “But he’s tactless, and somewhat short on imagination.”

He clumped out again.

“Infuriating fellow!” growled the Commandant, and dialled the Visi exchange operator. “Get me Hamilton, at Two.”

There was no TV beam between the two Lunar Bases, because something over two hundred miles separated them, and there were no relay stations. There was a sizeable arc of Moon between them, and TV waves travel only in straight lines. Therefore, the Bases were linked by a co-axial cable.

A face from Two appeared on the screen. But it wasn’t Hamilton. It was Smith, the man in charge at Two.

He said: “I understand you want to speak to Hamilton.” There was no “sir.” Smith thought of himself as the Commandant of Base Two, and therefore not inferior in rank to anyone on the Moon.

“I did,” said the Commandant. “Where is he?”

Smith had a moustache and kept fingering it.

“I’m afraid he’s not well.”

“Confound it, I want him to come over and give his opinion on something.”

“I hardly think he’s in a fit state to travel or give a rational opinion.”

“Why, what’s the matter with him?”

Smith seemed to be trying to pull his moustache off altogether. “Nothing, according to him,” he said, and paused. After another round with the moustache, he said: “It’s no use beating about the bush. He’s been drinking again.”

“What of it?” said the Commandant. “He’s got a ceramic-lined stomach. It doesn’t upset him.”

“It has this time. He’s been seeing ten-legged beasties

that aren't there. I've confined him to his room to cool off."

"Good heavens, that's a bad show! Mighty serious, in fact. You did the right thing. Can't have a D.T.s case wandering around loose in a Lunar Base. He might open both airlock doors at once, for instance, and suffocate you all. You're quite sure he hasn't got a fever?"

"If that were—" began Smith, and broke off. He was no longer looking into his screen, but over it. His mouth remained open like an idiot's. His eyes showed that the mind behind them was in the double grip of surprise and horror.

"What is it, man?" rapped the Commandant.

His tone shook Smith partly free from paralysis. Still staring above the screen, Smith said in a low and stumbling voice: "Something... has just come into my room... It's—it's like an octopus—or a spider—but three eyes... on stalks... and—"

He jumped up and back, upsetting his chair. "It's coming at me!"

He blundered sideways, past the Visi. The lower part of his face filled the screen momentarily. "T-ten legs!" came from his slack mouth as it slid from the screen. And now only the bare wall behind his desk was visible.

And then—something like two black sticks, but jointed and with a life of their own, appeared and hovered before the wall. Then they darted forward, towards the Visi itself. And the screen went dark, dead, and silent.

3

THE AFFAIR AT BASE TWO

THE Commandant stared dumb-struck at the blank screen of the Visi, while the Adjutant made incoherent ejaculatory sounds.

All at once the screen lit up again to depict the frightened face of the Base One operator.

"Communication with Two broken, sir. Can't raise them."

The Commandant came out of his trance. "Right. Get me Doran again. Then go on trying to contact Two."

"Yes, sir."

Presently, the wavering, flecked face of Doran appeared. "What is it now, Commandant?"

The Commandant told him, plainly and tersely. Doran listened intently and made him repeat some of the details.

"I propose sending my Adjutant over with an armed party. I'd like to go myself, but there may be more of these things around, and Base One is my first responsibility," concluded the Commandant.

"Send for Magnus," said Doran.

"But the Adjutant is quite capable—"

"Send for Magnus," repeated Doran, patiently.

The Commandant nodded to the Adjutant. "Fetch him, Tom."

The Adjutant turned to leave, and the Commandant called after him: "Tell him Mr Doran wants him." For the Commandant suspected that without that tag-line Magnus's

reply would be a pungent suggestion that he should send for Hamilton instead.

Doran was uncommunicative while they waited. It was plain that he was saving it for Magnus.

Magnus came, grumbling, the Adjutant behind him. Cut it out, Magnus—this is important," said Doran, sharply. "Commandant, tell him what's just happened at Two."

The Commandant told it over again. Magnus listened inscrutably.

"Well, Magnus, what's your theory?" asked Doran, at the end of it.

"Seems we're entertaining a visitor from Venus."

"You believe it came in that spaceship you picked up on the tracker?"

"What else?"

"Remember my telling you of that thing the Spaniards killed in the sea here?"

"What—the one with the water melon for a brain?"

"Yes," said Doran. "Well, it matches very well the description of the thing that walked into Smith's office. Ten legs-cum-tentacles—black, at that. Something between an octopus and a huge spider, with three eyes on stalks. And if Smith's visitant came in a spaceship, it must be highly intelligent, so doubtless it has a similarly large brain. The coincidences seem beyond coincidence—though perhaps they aren't. Because there's one big difference. The thing here is a creature that lives in the sea. Your friend there seems to be a land creature. But perhaps they're amphibious."

"Amphibians," said Magnus, heavily, "live on land or in fresh water—not sea water."

"All right, then. I'm no expert in that field. I've had our specimen rocketed straight to Plymouth, and I'm waiting

for a report from an expert there. Let's just say the darned things are crustacea—something like spider-crabs."

"Decapods," said Magnus, in the pause.

"Okay—decapods. Now, how have they both suddenly appeared on both Earth and Moon at roughly the same time? You say there was only one spaceship?"

"Yes. Only one that we saw."

"Could it have dropped a passenger there, and then come on to Earth? Or vice versa?"

Magnus shrugged. "I don't really see how. It's only a few hours since we saw the spaceship coming, presumably from Venus, on an orbit which would bring it to the Moon first, not Earth. It was keeping pace with the sampler, then travelling in a free fall to the Moon. At that distance, its speed would have been only about a mile per second. The Moon-Earth trip takes our ships three full days. Yet you talk of a ship landing here, taking off again, and reaching Earth all in just a few hours. That means the ship must have built up an appalling acceleration, enough to have flattened any decapod into a jelly. Of course, we can consider the possibility that your specimen arrived by an earlier ship. When you killed it, the Venusians got sort of upset and hot-footed it here bent on revenge, though this is hardly the right address."

"Are you trying deliberately to be obtuse, Magnus? If that ship shadowed the sampler from Venus, then it took months over the trip. Our specimen was killed only a few hours ago."

"Confusion worse confounded," said Magnus. "Nothing ties up. I suppose you want me to straighten it all out?"

"Naturally—what do you think you're paid for? I want you to go with the armed party to Base Two. Restrain the hot-heads: don't let 'em kill anyone or anything if it can be

avoided. See if you can get that creature alive. If it looks dangerous, keep your distance—use a telescopic lens and try to get a photo of him. A nice clear one—we want to compare him with our defunct specimen and see if they're related. We've got to know if this is the beginning of an organized invasion. If you get a picture, send it over the TV without delay."

"I'll make it a *moving* picture," said Magnus.

"Don't be rash."

"Of course, there might be more than one of the critturs. If so, I'll try to bring one back to share a dish of tea with you in that comfy office."

"Just send the picture."

"If I bring one back alive, can I have some leave?"

"You'll certainly deserve it."

"I deserve it now," said Magnus. "Don't try to trick me. I got caught that way once before. Promise yes or no."

"We-ell, all right. Bring one back alive and you'll get some leave. That is, if you remember to bring yourself back alive as well. You'd better be careful. By the way, if by any chance Smith is also alive, and you see him, tell him from me that there are more things in heaven and Earth than ever came out of a bottle. He owes Hamilton a drink."

Doran switched off. The radio and TV antennæ surmounting the white building in Trafalgar Square never ceased to vibrate to tales of trouble pouring in from over the seas and from under the seas—and from outer space. In the S.I.D. they had become hardened to hearing about other people's troubles. Matters of life and death were the constant factors in their work, and they hadn't time to sentimentalize about them.

The exchange operator came on to complain that he still couldn't get through to Base Two.

“I doubt if you will,” said the Commandant. “The trouble’s all at that end. Just leave the line open—and wait. We’re sending a party out there.”

Magnus started to leave.

“Where are you going?” snapped the Commandant.

“To my room, to get something for the trip.”

“We’ve cameras already in the tractors. And I’ll get the guns.”

“I’ll get my own gun. Besides, I want some more gum.”

“Disgusting habit,” said the Commandant. “Be down at the main entrance in ten minutes. Tom, see that these men get the same message: Chivers, Hoffmann, Verdi, Krishna...”

• • • • •

It is not easy to say which is the back end of a lunar tractor. The species have driving seats at both ends, because often when exploring the winding defiles among the Moon’s mountains tractor drivers find themselves in a cul-de-sac. And almost as often the defile is too narrow to allow the big vehicles to turn around. Therefore, to avoid tortuous backing for mile after mile, the driver merely changes his seat and the back becomes the front.

In effect, then, a tractor has a back only when it’s in motion. So the four tractors, with Martin Magnus and the Adjutant in the leading one, had their backs to the towering Straight Wall the moment they started their journey across the Mare to Base Two.

Even through a good telescope on Earth, the Mare Nubium looks smooth and level. In actual fact, like all the other Mares on the Moon, it is as smooth as a crust of barnacles. In countless places the ground swells up into sudden domes, twenty feet high, and between them lie pits

like bomb craters, patches of dust like quicksands, fissures yards wide, and naked spurs of rock which would rip the bottoms from any vehicles less substantial than these tank-like tractors.

Yet, because of their wide caterpillar treads and their marvellously sprung suspension, the tractors could keep up an average speed of some forty miles an hour. All the same, for the passengers it was like riding on an outsize camel, and tractor sickness was common.

The Adjutant remarked to Magnus that he hated this see-sawing about.

Magnus smiled absently. Through the double-walled, translucent dome of the tractor he could see Earth and his thoughts were upon it. He couldn't see it very clearly, for the plastic dome was darkened with chemicals to tone down the full glare of the sun and partially block the passage of its ultra-violet rays, which, in their ferocity on the near airless Moon, would otherwise have blinded the travellers.

But he could see Earth's air glowing like a halo, and the soft twilight zone, and the sunlit Pacific Ocean, and the dim shapes of the continental land masses. Above this bleak, lifeless world, with its harsh contrasts of glare and black shadows, Earth hung like a golden promise.

Yet, despite its beauty, Earth was no peaceful paradise. Rather, it was a battlefield.

On that globe, which from here looked no larger than a medicine ball, were crowded nearly four thousand million human beings. The battle was to feed them. Even half a century ago, the growing world population was outstripping its food production, living on the brink of famine. Swollen to nearly twice that number now, it still dwelt on that brink. Only the resources of science had stayed it from sliding over.

But to retain even that much salvation, the nations had been forced to pool their knowledge, open their frontiers, accept the world direction and authority of the Scientific Bureau. They kept their own local systems of government. Britain was still a monarchy and a democracy, America was still a republican democracy, and Russia still held to the system of soviets.

One and all, they had come to accept the governments they deserved. They had abandoned the pretence that all peoples in the world were of the same age, in the same class, and therefore should be under the same teacher.

But everyone needed to eat, and that had become increasingly difficult when the world's resources in brain, labour, and material were being wasted on preparations for wars of the old murderous kind. In the end, even Generals came to learn that they couldn't have roast beef on Sunday if they'd bombed the cattle on Saturday.

The real battle was not against each other, but alongside each other—for survival.

One battle-line lay across Earth's deserts—the Gobi, Sahara, the Arizonian, the Australian hinterland—where atomic energy blasted the way for canals and irrigation systems. On Mars the canals had been found ready-made, the work of Martians apparently long gone and about whose history little was known at the moment. The Martian vegetation, observed from Earth long before a spaceship had left it, had proved to be richly nutritious. It not only supported the pioneer colony there but, dehydrated and scientifically packed, was well worth the cost of rocket transport back to Earth.

For, because his own world was overcrowded, man had been driven to find living space on other worlds. This migration was only just beginning. It was tough going. The barren Moon was only suitable for mining rare elements, as

an observatory, as a great laboratory, and as a jumping-off place for the other planets.

Even Mars was arid, for most of the old canals were silted up and no longer performed their duty of conveying water from the melting polar caps to the regions of vegetation. But again atomic energy was lending its giant hand, and fast unblocking them.

Although Mars had some air, it was too thin for one to go around there without an oxygen mask. But there was plenty of oxygen on Mars, for the red deserts were only red because of the oxydised rocks which covered them. It was now just a matter of time before the Scientific Bureau launched the assault to release the oxygen from the rocks and replenish the whole planet with a life-supporting atmosphere.

Then the pioneer colony could break down the walls of its airtight settlements, and move out to possess its newly conquered breathing space.

It was ironic that man had to travel millions of miles through space to find new land to occupy, while he himself occupied only one-quarter of the surface of his native planet. Tantalizingly, three times as much land as he lived on lay below the oceans, almost wholly beyond his reach.

But he reclaimed what he could of the narrow strips of the continental shelves, and even farmed the ocean itself. As sea-farmers, the Japanese led the way, as they had always done. Possessing coastlines which added up to more than three times the length of the American coastlines, they early made the sea feed their small overcrowded isles. Seaweed—especially kelp—had long been known to be edible and nourishing. They cultivated it; also great masses of the microscopic sea-creatures and vegetables called plankton, nutritious in the extreme. They bred squid by the thousand million—substantial, satisfying

fish. They herded whales, not only for their meat but also for their milk, one of the richest foods known.

The other maritime nations followed the Japanese because they had to. The topsoil of their land was becoming exhausted, and large tracts of it had to be rested to regain nutriment.

But the ocean, with its storms and tidal waves that often smashed a year's work overnight, its crushing pressure which reached seven tons to the square inch in the deeps, and its monsters lurking in the Abyss which resented and fought even this slight encroachment of man into the waters, was also a battlefield.

The men who fought these perils on and under the sea boasted that spacemen, whom they termed "starbugs", were soft compared with them. The spacemen jeered in response that if these "shrimps", as they contemptuously called them, could ever summon the guts to ride a rocket into the gulfs of space, then they'd soon learn who really had the tough jobs and would cry real tears and beg to return to their paddling in the sea.

But, secretly, both types admitted that toughest of all were the S.I.D. men, who had to face both spheres in the tour of their duties.

Heaven for the S.I.D. man was his spell of leave on the land, safe between the ocean deeps and the deeps of space.

And so Martin Magnus, overdue his leave, sat in the swaying tractor on the Moon, dreaming of heaven. His reverie sank gradually into real dreaming as he fell asleep.

Hours later, the Adjutant awakened him with a nudge.

"We're nearly there."

Beyond the horizon, which seemed alarmingly close to them (for on the Moon the horizon is barely two miles away), a silver spire was rising slowly into view. It was the nose of the spaceship *Archimedes*. But a short way

beyond it, they knew, lay Base Two.

"Slow down," said Magnus to the driver. "It's time we started crawling."

He stood up to see better, raking the horizon with field-glasses. For if the Venusian, or Venusians, were still in Base Two then it was quite likely that the Venusian spaceship lay somewhere near.

Presently, the three silvered domes of the Base began to peep back at him over the horizon. They were semi-spheres of woven glass filament, which is but a third of the weight of steel yet twice as strong, and a far better insulator against the flaming heat of the lunar day and the bitter cold of the lunar night.

"Stop," said Magnus.

"See anything?" asked the Adjutant, with a sort of eager apprehension.

Magnus didn't answer at once. He was surveying the Base carefully in detail. *Archimedes* stood stiffly on its tail a mile away, planted among a low huddle of temporary workshops. One of Tycho's streaks ran glitteringly from horizon to horizon behind it. Before men landed on the Moon, it was still supposed that the rays were deposits of ash blown in radiating streaks from a volcanic vent just outside Tycho's crater—probably a branch of the main lava vent.

The theory of origin was correct. But the rays turned out to be a ready-made alloy, not dissimilar to steel, blown spume-like from a cauldron of molten metal far below the Moon's surface. That had happened long before life had emerged from the sea on Earth. Yet still the internal fires of the Moon smouldered, near extinction, but warm enough to be detected by deep boring instruments.

In this area those instruments had run into one of the last things expected to be found on the Moon: water. The

Moon was quite porous, with whole systems of underground caverns. Here some of the deepest caverns contained water, unfrozen partly because it was salt water, partly because enough warmth from the internal fires percolated to keep it just above freezing point.

This was a discovery of great importance. For water was the propellant needed by all atomic spaceships.

Base Two was built primarily as the stepping-off point for Venus. *Archimedes* could carry enough propellant in its tanks to reach the escape velocity of seven miles a second from Earth and still have sufficient left to brake for the landing on the Moon or even on Mars, each of whose gravity was much less than Earth's.

But the gravity of Venus was very nearly as strong as Earth's. The Venusian landing would need more than twice as much propellant as for the landing on Mars, and more than three times as much as for a lunar landing. *Archimedes* just couldn't carry enough to go straight from Earth to Venus and land there.

So the plan was for it to stop off at the Moon on the way and refill its tanks with water pumped up from the caverns lying beneath this region. Again, the extra fittings needed in the ship for the much longer voyage could be fashioned here on the Moon from the metal—called "Tychite"—of the neighbouring ray. This metal didn't even have to be mined, since the rays were little else than thirty-foot high embankments of raw metal just lying there for the taking.

"No," said Magnus, finally. "Everything looks okay—outside. But I can't see behind the domes. We'd better skirmish around first in case anything's hiding there."

"Good idea," said the Adjutant, He spoke over the radio to the occupants of the three tractors lying behind them. "Stay here, hull down. I'll warn you if we run into

trouble. Keep your ears and eyes open."

Their tractor began grinding out in a wide circle to take them around the group of domes. When they drew level with the back of the first dome, the Adjutant peered hard into the black shadow lying there almost like a solid thing. But nothing lurked there, nor behind the next, nor behind the last. Presently, the domes began again to dazzle their eyes with reflected sunlight as the tractor moved around towards its starting point.

The Adjutant stared at the domes themselves, still wondering what now might lie behind their smooth windowless walls. Had the weird invader been alone or one of many? If there had been many of them, had they battled with the staff? Was the battle still in progress in there? Or was it over? Then who had won? If the invaders had won, were they still in possession? Or had they departed, leaving the domes only to the dead?

If they had indeed gone, they had politely stopped to close the airlock doors behind them—which seemed unlikely.

He had the feeling that had Bruce, the leader of the proposed Venusian expedition, still been running things here, the invaders would have got the worst of it, and the rescue party from Base One would have been met on its way by triumphant men.

But Smith was useless—an opinionated muddle-head. The Adjutant had little hope that all would be well inside.

They completed their circuit. Each dome had an airlock, and each lock was tight shut. But that was as it should be. Visitors always had to open the door for themselves.

The Adjutant radioed his other tractors: "We're going in. Stay where you are until you see my tractor come out again. When you do, you'll know it's all right. Then you'll

enter in your turn—all of you. If our tractor doesn't appear within ten minutes, tractors two and three will simultaneously enter the other two domes, every man ready to fire, and tractor four will wait where it is and observe. If none of us emerges within half an hour after that, then tractor four will make all speed back to Base One and report to the Commandant. Is that clear?"

The radio-operators acknowledged in turn.

The Adjutant looked sidelong at Magnus to see if any comment were forthcoming on his operational plan. But Magnus used his jaws only to chew. Apparently, he approved.

The airlocks were only just large enough to accommodate one tractor at a time. So when a caravan of tractors arrived, the first would enter, drop its crew, and the driver would back it out and make way for the following tractor. And so on. It meant that every tractor except the last finished up outside, complete with its driver. If the drivers wanted to come in also, they would have to don the very cumbersome lunar spacesuit and come in on foot. Getting into a lunar spacesuit was quite as troublesome as donning a complete suit of mediæval armour, and it was to save all this that airlocks were designed to admit a tractor complete.

In each airlock door was set an outsize button, three inches in diameter. It had to be pressed hard to complete the electrical circuit which opened the door automatically.

The Adjutant tapped the driver on the shoulder: "In we go."

He made sure his electrical dart pistol was loose in its holster. One of these darts could paralyse an elephant or kill a man. The pistol held twenty shots.

Magnus had a rifle beneath his seat. He seemed to have forgotten it was there. It was a peculiar-looking thing with

a large butt, made to his own design. No one had ever seen him use it. Indeed, no one knew how it worked, and Magnus made it clear that he wasn't going to deliver any lectures about it.

Protruding from the front of each tractor was a short, flat-ended pole, like a ram. The Adjutant's driver carefully juggled his vehicle until he was able to push the door button hard with the pole. Then he reversed for a few yards.

Presently, the door swung open, outwards. The small volume of air in the lock rushed out into the near-void of the Moon, raising a brief dust-cloud about the tractor as a sign of its passage.

The tractor pulled slowly into the lock, which was electric-lit. There was another button on the far door. The tractor's pole nudged it. This served a double purpose: it closed the outer door behind them, and a minute later opened the inner door, admitting air from the Dome's interior.

Now it was safe to emerge from the tractor—at least, from an atmospheric point of view. Magnus was first out, rifle in hand. The Adjutant and the crew of six clambered out behind him. They moved out of the airlock, so that it could be closed and the driver back out.

The Adjutant said: "We'll wait here for another load to come in. Meanwhile, all have your guns cocked ready for action."

Magnus said quietly: "There'll be no shooting unless I say so. We don't want to start a war if we can help it. Let's first find what we're up against."

The Adjutant began: "But—"

The beak-like nose flashed round on him. "Those are the Bureau's orders. I want no arguments."

Magnus seemed to have grown a few inches taller since

he stepped out of the tractor. His brown eyes were cold as he looked down at the Adjutant. He continued: “Wait here till I come back. I’ll be back—I promise you.”

He turned abruptly, and walked off down the passage leading into the body of the Dome. Its sharp curve soon took him out of sight. Subconsciously, the Adjutant noticed that in spite of the leaden soles Magnus was walking as quietly as a cat.

He resigned himself to wait. The second tractor’s crew arrived, then the third and the fourth. Twenty-six men waited in the passage—for Magnus. Twenty minutes had passed, and the Adjutant had become jittery. The passage curved emptily before them under its electric lights.

The three Domes, big as they were, were yet little more than the roofs to the entrances of Base Two. The real Base was well underground, a natural group of caves which had been linked by tunnelling. The excavations were still going on pretty extensively, for Smith nursed the ambition of making this Base even larger than One. In Smith’s view, importance was relative only to size. He might yet become the most important man on the Moon.

The Adjutant wondered how far Magnus had penetrated into the underground maze.

One of the men said: “Sir, is it wise for us to stay bunched up like this? We could all be trapped if—”

“Don’t worry,” cut in the Adjutant. “We have enough concentrated fire power in either direction to stop anything getting near us. If we straggle out all over the place, we’ll be in danger of shooting ourselves. We can’t attack till we know where the enemy is.”

He said this merely to quieten the man. On reflection, it seemed to him to be quite good sense. His respect for Magnus as a strategist grew, for this must have been obvious to Magnus in the first place.

Footsteps sounded along the passage—the familiar beat of leaden soles. The Adjutant breathed more easily, for this meant that there was little fear of the enemy being within earshot.

Magnus and Smith came into view. Smith grinned a bit uneasily, and waved.

"Hello, Tom. Sorry to have brought you right out here, but the brutes created havoc in the communications room: tore out the lines by the yard and smashed half the equipment. But we should be through again soon."

"What are they?" asked the Adjutant.

"Wish I knew. Magnus here tells me they may be from Venus."

"Glad to see you still in one piece, anyway," said the Adjutant, with more formality than warmth. "Anyone hurt?"

"No. They didn't touch us. When that one started for me, I thought I'd had it. But the brute merely tore the Visi out by the roots, gave me a dirty look and ambled off."

"Where to?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," said Magnus.

"How many were seen?" asked the Adjutant.

"That's what we're trying to find out," repeated Magnus, in the same dry tone.

Smith explained: "The trouble is that only one was seen at a time. Hamilton saw one, as I reported. I saw one. The operator in the communications room saw one. But all at different times, so it may have been the same one."

"What did it look like to you?"

"Like nothing on Earth," said Smith, resurrecting a joke that had died of old age. "A head on five pairs of stilts. Three eyes on muscly stalks which can turn all ways—they scare you stiff. It stands about seven feet tall. It's something like a huge spider-crab, only it has ten thin

black legs, or tentacles—they're many-jointed and very flexible. It can use the two front pairs, at least, as arms. According to my operator, it tore into the signal apparatus like a sort of windmill gone mad. It's terrifically strong, too—it broke cables as though they were string. It could make short work of an unarmed man."

"Sounds formidable," said the Adjutant. "I hope there aren't many of 'em, and they're not too intelligent."

Magnus rolled a gum wrapper into a ball and flicked it against the wall.

"We shouldn't underrate the intelligence of the species," he said. "A sensible first move in any attack is to destroy the enemy's communications. It creates confusion, stops any message for reinforcements. This thing seemed to know what it was doing, to some extent."

"In that case, why didn't it press on with the attack?" asked Smith. "It could have killed me, Hamilton, and the operator. We were all alone and unarmed."

"I'm still wondering about that," said Magnus.

"And I'm still wondering about a lot of things," said the Adjutant. "If the thing, or things, came in a spaceship, where's the ship? How did the thing get in? Where's it now? And where's Hamilton and the rest of the Two crowd?"

"Hamilton and his staff are still sorting out the communications," explained Smith. "Magnus has put the others to work examining the walls in the lower levels. He thinks the things came in somewhere down there."

"Why?" asked the Adjutant, looking at Magnus.

Magnus chewed a while, then said: "First thing I did was to check that the full personnel were actually present in the Base. They are. That means that the last people to use the airlocks came in through them. Therefore, there should be air in the locks, as there was in this one when we

came, because it's the rule that you return through the same lock by which you leave."

"Well?"

"There was air in the other two locks also—I checked. Now, if the things had quitted through any one of the locks, the air would have escaped through the outer door before they could shut it. That would leave a near-vacuum in the lock. The Base has been searched. They're not in here now. They haven't gone out through the locks. They couldn't have got through the glass walls of the Domes without cracking them and letting all the air out. So I reckon they got in through the underground workings—where Hamilton first saw one—and went out the same way. We know from the trial borings that there are plenty of underground caverns around this way that we haven't broken into yet. My guess is that they found a back door from them into the Base system. I've got men hunting for it."

"Pretty detective work," said the Adjutant, admiringly. "You seem to have done a lot in twenty minutes. I've got to hand it to you—you can certainly use your head. I can't say the same for you, Smith. Why didn't you set a guard on the airlocks after what happened? I walked in here with twenty-six other men without your even knowing it. Those things could have swarmed in by the hundred just as easily."

Smith began some stammering excuses, when the fates who favours fools saved him. A couple of men came hurrying along the passage. The leading one panted: "We've found it!"

Smith paled. "The thing?"

"No, sir—the hole we think it came through."

Magnus grabbed the man's arm. "Show me." They went off, Magnus gripping his man as though he were a

prisoner.

Smith and the Adjutant were left staring at each other. The latter recovered his initiative. “Come on!” he snapped to his men.

The gathering began to troop along the passage. Through the silent Dome they went, with its storerooms and testing plants, downstairs past the library, the gymnasium, the mess hall, the games room, the rows of laboratories and offices, down through the sleeping quarters, the kitchens, the heavy gear rooms, down again through the atomic power and light plant, down to the levels where the rooms to be were still but rough-hewn cavities in the walls, where electric drills and assorted mining apparatus lay on the uneven floor amid slabs and chunks of rock but recently prised from the surrounding mass of the lunar crust.

Along one of these echoing, low tunnels, where the lights were so widely spaced that there were frequent patches of gloom, they caught up with Magnus. At first glance he appeared to be lying on the floor, headless.

Then they perceived he had stuck his head and one arm through a small and raggedly circular hole in the wall very near to the floor. Beside him lay a slab of rock a few inches thick, the shape of which matched the hole.

The Adjutant knelt and laid a hand gently on Magnus’s back. Magnus ignored it for another couple of minutes, then wriggled back and free. It became apparent that he had been exploring the aperture with a torch.

“What do you think, Magnus?” asked the Adjutant.

“I’m pretty sure this is it. Lordy, the thing must have been able to fold up like a camera tripod to get through this. Just about enough headroom for it, I guess. I’m no Atlas, but I can’t get my shoulders through.”

“Well, don’t be in a hurry to,” the Adjutant advised. “In

fact, you'd be silly to act the ferret. Now we've found the rabbit-hole, it's only a matter of laying a trap this side. We'll replace the plug so the things won't suspect."

He indicated the loose rock slab, and then looked more closely at it.

"This hasn't been just knocked out of the wall," he said. "Gosh, it looks all nibbled round the edges! Don't tell me the things have got teeth that tough!"

Smith had a look. "They certainly look like toothmarks. They must have teeth like chisels!"

"Why not assume they just *used* chisels?" said Magnus with the weariness of a teacher with a backward class.

"I wish I could make sense of this," muttered the Adjutant. "Could you see anything in there, Magnus?"

"Very little. There's a sizeable natural cave. I couldn't see the back of it. No sign of any beasties—but they could have been watching me from the dark at the far end."

For some reason this seemed to strike the Adjutant as funny. "To them you must have looked just like an Aunt Sally." He laughed, and even Smith grinned.

Magnus smiled also, regarding the Adjutant a trifle mockingly. "Do you feel a bit light-headed?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. The air seems very fresh down here."

"A mite too fresh," said Magnus, getting to his feet. "The atmosphere beyond this hole is almost pure oxygen, and it's drifting through. You'd get really dizzy if you stuck your head through there."

He fitted the rock slab carefully back into place.

"Leave a guard here—say three men," he advised. "But remember—no shooting unless they're attacked. If there's only one of the creatures, I want it alive. Now, I must see Hamilton."

The Adjutant left the guard posting to Smith, and

joined Magnus in the search for Hamilton. They found him in Smith's office installing a new Visi.

Hamilton was a tall Scot. He had what he himself termed a "patriotic face"—for he had a red nose, white hair, and blue eyes. He'd been born in London, educated at Cambridge, and had only the slightest trace of a Scottish accent. The bulge in his hip pocket showed through his coat, as always. Some people swore he had a hip pocket in his pyjamas also. Certainly, wherever he was he liked to have a whisky flask within reach.

"Hello, sir," he greeted the Adjutant. "Hello, Martin—I'd heard you were coming."

"The name is Magnus," said Magnus, distantly.

"So it is. Have a wee nip?"

"Save it till we've got something to celebrate," cut in the Adjutant. "Are we through to Base One yet?"

"Yes, sir. You'll be able to get through on this Visi if you'd care to wait a couple of minutes."

"Good."

The Visi was fixed, and Magnus let his business wait until the Adjutant had reported the situation to the Commandant. Then he asked Hamilton: "Can you let me have a spare Visi of the portable kind?"

"Sure, if you want one."

"I do. Also I want an extension line laid from the communications room to a point in the new workings that I'll show you. Also a couple of drums of that superfine twin cable. And a spot-light."

"What's the idea?" asked the Adjutant.

"I'm going to try to get those moving pictures I promised old Doran."

"Glory be! You're as crazy as a coot. Can I be assistant cameraman?"

"Thanks—but no. This is a one-man job. For one thing,

it won't take long to enlarge that hole to let me through—I'm almost a skeleton. But you..." He eyed the Adjutant's considerable girth meaningly. "For another thing, you couldn't take the pure oxygen for long without doing something darned silly. I shouldn't like to trust anyone but myself in it. I'm seasoned—I've had to live on the stuff for weeks in some spots I've got into in my time. For another, you're trigger-happy, and I want to bring myself back alive as well as a beastie. You wouldn't have the right approach."

"I don't agree—but I can't stop you. We'd better tell the Commandant."

"I'll leave that to you. I've got to talk to *my* old man."

Magnus sent Hamilton for the equipment, and then got through to Doran via the Base One exchange. He explained the position and his intentions.

"You'd better take a tape-recording of my pictures," he added.

"To be sure," said Doran's unsteady image on the Visi.

"That'll serve until I lead a living specimen into your office on a string."

"Forget that nonsense," said Doran. "Don't you want to see Sycamore Lane again?"

"I shan't begin to live again until I walk into Sycamore Lane," said Magnus, soberly. "I want that leave you promised me. By the way, isn't it time you retired, Doran? I'm in line for that snug little job of yours. When I'm sitting at that desk, I'll be able to go home to Sycamore Lane every night. Every night—just think of it!"

"I shall. Meantime, I'll keep the seat warm for you," said Doran, affably. "Good luck!"

His smiling face melted away into the blank eye of the Visi.

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The hole in the wall had been enlarged enough to permit Magnus to crawl through comfortably, though backwards. He'd flashed the powerful spotlight around the cave first, and seen nothing but rocky walls dwindling into the distances under a lowering roof.

No more had been seen or heard of the beast, or beasts. But, as Hamilton said, that didn't mean that they weren't still around somewhere. He added that he wasn't anxious to meet another one.

Smith and a pair of armed guards stood and watched while the Adjutant knelt and passed impedimenta through the hole to Magnus.

"That seems to be everything," said the Adjutant, presently, passing Magnus's peculiar rifle through. "You think you've got enough water and concentrated food—and gum?"

There was an affirmative grunt from the hole.

"If you need help, you've only to call for it over the Visi, and we'll come at the double," said the Adjutant.

"A very comforting thought," said Magnus, muffledly. "Have someone keeping watch on the Visi and ready to switch me through to Doran if and when I ask for it. Otherwise, please don't interfere unless I request it. 'Bye for now."

"Goodbye," said the Adjutant. "Remember me to the White Rabbit, if you meet him."

"Also to your brother, Tweedledum," came faintly and sarcastically.

For a little time outside they heard Magnus shuffling off into the unknown with his burdens, lighting his way and laying his twin cable as he went. The sounds died away.

They stood a while in the silence. The heady oxygen

continued to impregnate the air around them. It was like a tonic.

"Well, Smith," said the Adjutant with unwonted camaraderie, "we'd better bumble off upstairs and follow the adventures of Martin Magnus on the Visi."

4

THE LAST OF MAGNUS

LORD NELSON stood on his white column, looking far cleaner than in the smoky London of yore, surveying Trafalgar Square stonily with one eye more than he should have. At the balustrade before the National Gallery a row of idlers leant and surveyed just as stonily the splashing fountains as though they were expecting them at any moment to change into wine.

The sky was like a great sheet of light blue satin. A pale, day-dimmed half-Moon lay against it like a broken plate.

But Cliff Page had eyes only for the tall white building, with the hedge of TV aerials on its roof, on the far side of the Square. Only an hour ago he had been in Plymouth, and the Scientific Bureau to him then was only a vague "they" or "them" in faraway London, who paid his salary and filed —and maybe sometimes even read—the reports he sent in irregularly from the Maritime Biological Station.

Now "they" were there, in the flesh, awaiting him—in that building.

Doran, Chief of the Special Investigation Department, had sent for him personally—Doran, who had the nerve-ends of all the world, including the thread from the Plymouth Station, gripped in his hands. At Plymouth, when they'd heard that Cliff had been summoned before the presence, they had jibed: "I wouldn't be in your shoes!"

His laboratory friends told him Doran was intolerant of

the slightest mistakes, unjust, evil-tempered to the point of violence, humourless, and loathed sycophants: there was no getting on the right side of him, for he had no right side.

So as Cliff began to walk across the Square he felt that his legs were losing their strength.

But once through the portals of the white building, he found the doorman, the lift attendant, and Doran's cool blonde female secretary were all in turn polite and pleasant, seemed to sense his apprehension and did their best to put him at ease.

They only succeeded in reminding him of dentists' receptionists.

He almost expected to find Doran wearing a white coat and a "this-won't-hurt-you-much" expression. Instead, he was wearing a perfectly pressed pearl-grey suit, a white buttonhole, an old-fashioned diamond stick-pin in his sober tie, and a worried expression. His hair was snow-white and parted neatly on the wrong side. He sat at an enormous rosewood desk which was piled high with wire trays stuffed with papers.

His blotting pad lay in the centre of an arc of Visi screens, for often he would have to address a group of people scattered over the solar system, yet collected here in this room by the all-embracing electronic tentacles of the Bureau's communications system.

He stood up with outstretched hand to greet Cliff. He smiled, and the deep lines of worry magically vanished altogether.

"Good afternoon, Mr Page. That was a first-class report you sent in about the Malacante decapod. I wanted to see you about it."

Cliff's momentary relief was replaced by another anxiety. It had been a good report. He had thrown all he knew into it. He had quite exhausted his knowledge of

decapods. If he were requested now to enlarge upon the report, he would be completely at a loss.

So he stammered "Th-thank you, sir," and waited in trepidation.

But Doran's next inquiry was a general one about the well-being of the personnel of the Plymouth station, and this was easy to answer.

Doran's comment was: "I'm very pleased to hear it. Plymouth always led the world in marine biology, and in my opinion it still does. Your brother is one of the most capable directors the station has ever had."

"Ken is very conscientious," agreed Cliff, colouring a little on his brother's behalf.

"Between you and me," smiled Doran, "I'm pretty sure there'll be a knighthood awaiting him on his return from this trip. 'Sir Kenneth Page'—how does that sound?"

"Fine, sir. But what trip are you referring to? Ken didn't tell me he was going anywhere."

"He didn't know himself until half an hour ago, when I told him. At this moment he should be on the way to the airport, bound for Malacante. There's been another raid there."

One of the Visi screens flashed and buzzed. The blonde secretary's face appeared on it. She beamed, seeming to make the screen glow brighter than usual.

"Mr Bruce is here, sir. Do you wish to see him now?"

"Please, Olivia."

The screen darkened.

"Nice girl, don't you think, Page?"

Cliff happily assented.

"Someone's got to look cheerful around here," said Doran. "I find it a bit of a strain myself."

Cliff was looking eagerly at the door. He guessed that "Mr Bruce" was Beckworth Bruce, the leader of the Venus

expedition. His name was already historical, for he was the first man ever to set foot on Mars. And Cliff was prone to hero-worship.

The door opened a little way, and Beckworth Bruce—who had once refused a peerage—inserted himself inconspicuously. Cliff was surprised. He recognized the wan face with the sunken eyes, and the smooth pate which had generated the sobriquet of "Baldy Bruce." But he hadn't known that Bruce was exactly five feet in height and as spare as a clothes horse. Because of the eternal fuel-ratio-to-load problem of spaceships, spacemen were never overweight. But Bruce must surely be the lightest of space jockeys.

Doran greeted him warmly. "Hello, there. Lovely day."

Bruce's eyes moved a fraction to take in through the window the view of sunlit Trafalgar Square. Then they moved back to Doran. Plainly, he'd noted for the first time that it was a lovely day. Equally plainly, he was of the opinion that the matter was of no consequence.

Unperturbed, Doran said: "Baldy, I want you to meet Cliff Page. He's the younger brother of Kenneth Page, who's just about our best marine biologist."

Bruce clasped Cliff's hand in a disproportionately big fist, crushed it into what felt to Cliff like a shapeless blob, while a smile flitted across his cadaverous face and was gone in almost the same instant.

"How do you do?" said Cliff. Bruce ignored the query, knowing it to be perfunctory and therefore a waste of time. He turned a questioning gaze on Doran.

Doran hastened to explain. "I asked you along because I want you to see a tape-film we got only a couple of hours ago of a TV broadcast from the Moon. Magnus kept his promise. He sent us living pictures. They show you what your landing party may be up against on Venus—and what

we may be up against here too, though I'm not sure about that now: the latest report from Malacante was most confusing."

A Visi flashed and buzzed. The exchange operator's face appeared.

"Mr Doran, will you accept a call from Spaceship *Newton*? They've encountered the wreck of Spaceship *Oberth* on the edge of the asteroid belt and want instructions."

"I can't now," said Doran. "I shall be engaged for the next half-hour. During that time pass all incoming calls to Mr Krasnowitcz—with the exception of any from the Lunar Bases. Of those I wish to be informed at once."

He switched off and picked up the thread of what he had been saying. "There's been another raid at Malacante. As before, the undersea ultra-violet lamps were torn away from their setting and the cables broken beyond repair. The whole system will have to be relaid, if and when we know it's safe to attempt it. But before I tell you about that, I want you both to see Magnus's pictures. If you'll come with me..."

Doran led the way into a small viewing room adjoining his office. There were a couple of dozen seats facing a large blank screen on the wall. They sat together in the front row. Doran fiddled with a control on the arm of his seat, and the lights went out and the screen came to life in light and sound, though there wasn't much of either.

They were looking at a rocky cavern which was lit only in patches as a spot-light moved around it.

The voice of Martin Magnus sounded: "I glimpsed our friend the decapod somewhere over in yon corner. I'll try to find him for you."

The spotlight quartered the cavern, and then suddenly was motionless.

"There he is."

Cliff gripped the arms of his seat as he saw an incredibly large decapod almost filling the circle of white light, its three eyes moving slowly on their stalks and occasionally glinting with the reflection of the beam Magnus was directing at it. It seemed to be recumbent on its four back legs and moving the foremost six deliberately in the air, as if readying itself either to receive an attack or launch one.

"I think," said Magnus, "it's making rude gestures."

Cliff felt irritated by the unseen, and to him unknown, commentator, with his hoarse voice of uncertain pitch and his ill-timed jests. What was this queer kind of decapod, which he had examined so minutely back in Plymouth after its arrival by rocket from Malacante, doing on the Moon—of all places?

Doran's hand gripped Cliff's knee hard. He whispered: "I want you to take a good look at this thing."

Then, from the screen, Magnus said: "I'm going to leave the spotlight and Visi here and go forward to say hello."

Immediately, the voice of the Commandant of Lunar Base One, linked to the broadcast by cable, exclaimed: "Don't be an idiot, Magnus! Stay where you are."

Following which Doran's voice, exclaiming at the same time but delayed a couple of seconds through the long journey from Earth, said: "Keep away, Magnus! We just want the pictures."

But the back of Magnus came into view, a tall thin figure stepping cautiously forward, a microphone in one hand, an odd rifle in the other. And slowly the decapod retreated before him, its forward extensions—be they arms, legs, or tentacles, for they seemed to serve all purposes—weaving threateningly.

Cliff's heart was in his mouth. He had guessed now that he was watching Martin Magnus, the legendary hero of the S.I.D., at work. He had dissected the muscles in those decapod limbs—or ones apparently similar to them—and realized the steely strength residing in them. They could tear a man—and Magnus, despite his fame, was only a man—limb from limb. He had been mighty glad that the specimen he had examined was dead. But the one Magnus was facing was very much alive.

Cliff felt that he wanted to cry out with the others: "Don't be an idiot!" Yet he knew that he was watching only a tape-film of past events and no word from him could change the outcome now: it had already happened.

The shapes of Magnus and the towering decapod became smaller as they moved steadily away, down the cave. By some trick of the light, the decapod seemed to be retreating into the spidery tangle of its own shadow. Magnus's shadow lay long and thin on the floor in the hard white light, pointing like a rapier at the creature.

Cliff knew nothing of the background to these events. But he was concerned about Magnus. He kept asking himself anxiously: "Can't he see it's deliberately luring him into the dark, where he won't be able to see to shoot?"

Then he caught his breath, for as man and creature diminished in the great circle of light, so there became visible, past them, in the distance, a thick group of decapods standing motionless.

Magnus seemed to notice them for the first time too. He stopped dead, then levelled his gun. There was an awful silence. Then a queer groaning began. It was unearthly. It echoed mournfully around the cave like the call of a sick banshee. It made Cliff's flesh creep.

"Is that the decapods, sir?" he whispered urgently to Doran.

"That," said Doran, dryly, "is Martin Magnus—singing."

Then Doran's voice sounded again, this time from the tape, cutting sharply across the painful noise. "Magnus, return to Base at once. That's an order."

Magnus ceased abruptly his murdering of the aria "Nessun Dorma," and clapped the hand holding the microphone against the small of his back. "Ouch! That old lumbago's got me again! It would pick a time like this! Sorry, Doran, I just can't move. Ain't it queer how lumbago hits you all of a sudden? I've got it bad this time. Put me on the sick list, will you?"

There was silence for a few seconds as the decapod backed slowly into the group of its fellows and became part of it.

Then Doran's recorded voice sounded through space again: "Stop fooling, Magnus. You heard my order. If you disregard it, you'll get no leave this side of the next transit of Venus, I promise you."

Before he finished, a tiny decapod, only a foot high, broke away from the group and came skittering like a spider towards Magnus. He reversed his gun, holding it like a club.

"Hey, why don't you pick someone your own size?" he said.

The little creature, all legs, zigzagged around him. Magnus extended the butt of his rifle slowly, and the thing leaped suddenly at it and wrapped itself around it, apparently trying to crush it.

Magnus swung the rifle back and forth as though he were about to drive off a golf ball. Still the creature clung. Then Magnus made a tremendous swing and checked it completely in mid-air. The small decapod, carried on by the impetus, lost its grip and went flying across the cave to

its parent group. Under the Moon's weak gravity it began to fall slowly through a shallow curve.

The bunch of decapods looked like a big spiky bush as its members reached out dozens of limbs to catch it. It landed neatly in the middle of them, and they eased its fall.

"A hole in one!" exclaimed Magnus, in a near squeak. "The drinks are on me, gentlemen."

Out of the margins of darkness behind him, emerging from opposing sides into the beam of the Spotlight, two full-size decapods closed rapidly upon Magnus in his moment of triumph. His rifle was wrenched from him and his arms pinioned at his sides. The nightmare creatures formed a hideous live net about him.

But still he gripped the microphone. He panted: "Okay, Doran, I'm an idiot—I should've looked behind me. No alibis. Reckon I shan't get that leave, at that."

The microphone cable was pulled apart in tapering shreds of wire and insulation by powerful tentacles.

The far crowd of decapods came hurrying towards the scene of the struggle, spreading out as it came until the whole screen was a confusion of waving spidery limbs, bobbing round heads, and unblinking fishy eyes moving all ways. Everything was happening in complete silence now, which somehow made it more awful.

Cliff imagined the sort of fate that Magnus could be meeting in the centre of that mêlée, and felt sick. Relief came quickly when one of the creatures advanced, looming largely, directly towards the screen, limbs reaching for the Visi transmitter to break that link also; it succeeded, for the screen went dark in an instant.

The lights went on in the viewing room.

Doran turned to Cliff. "Well, young man, would you say those decapods belong to the same species as the one you examined?"

Cliff hesitated. “It’s hard to say, sir—the definition of the pictures wasn’t all that good. The things are obviously from the same family, but I couldn’t say if they’re of the same branch without examining them in more detail.”

“We can’t show you any more detail,” said Doran. “Enlarging the pictures will only make them even more coarse—this was a TV broadcast across space, you know.”

“Then I can’t be any more definite, sir.”

“I see.” Doran sighed. “Well, you’re probably wondering what it’s all about. I’ll put you in the picture.”

They remained in their seats while Doran recounted the history of the recent events on the Moon, beginning with the appearance of the mysterious double radar image and bringing the story up to date with the reception of the recorded TV broadcast they’d just seen. Bruce, who had heard most of it before, just sat solemnly puffing clouds of smoke from a pipe that looked far too big for him.

“Immediately Magnus’s Visi was smashed, I ordered the Adjutant to take his party in to the rescue—if it weren’t already too late,” continued Doran. “They were slow off the mark—hadn’t any portable lights ready, and it would have been suicide to have gone into those caverns with just hand-torches. They followed the cables for half a mile before they came to the broken ends. There were no signs of decapods, of Magnus, nor even of a struggle. We still don’t know whether Magnus is alive or dead. The caverns are an enormous maze, easy to get lost in, easy to get trapped in. We don’t know how many decapods are skulking in there, but the pictures showed at least a score. I recalled the party after they’d searched for a couple of hours in vain. They were at too much of a disadvantage on the creatures’ own ground, and the farther they penetrated the more dangerous it became. Probably those things can see in the dark. To lose further men would have got us

nowhere."

Bruce spoke for the first time, a thin precise voice from a tobacco-smoke cloud.

"This all sounds pretty negative, Doran. Haven't you any plans for getting us *some*where?"

Doran wasn't put out. "I've done what I can. The best plan of attack is to strike at the heart of an enemy, not his limbs. That heart, surely, is the Venusian ship, their base, their only means of escape. I've ordered all tractors out to search for it. Like Magnus, I believe it's somewhere around Base Two. Additionally, I've got the telescopes at the space-stations searching that whole area of the Moon. They could easily detect a ship that size."

"Unless it's camouflaged," said Bruce, dryly.

Doran shrugged, and went on: "I've organized Base Two so that it's one big trap. The cavern entrance—the hole—has been left invitingly open. I've ordered that no one goes near it. All work in the lower levels has stopped—they're deserted. The way up to the communications room is also deserted—seemingly. But in the offices and in the side ways I have all available men concealed, armed, and in communication with each other. If any decapod ventures up that way again, they're to lie low and let it through. Then link up behind it and cut off its retreat. If it counter-attacks, they're to shoot, merely to disable if possible; to kill, if unavoidable."

"D'you think the things are that stupid?" asked the voice from the cloud.

"I'm sure nobody knows. Personally, I think the attack on our communications was just an attempt to frighten us away from Two. Maybe they want to take it over as *their* Lunar Base. I'm trying to kid them that they've succeeded, persuade 'em we've left the place. It's the best way to draw them out."

"If it doesn't work, what then? Will you smoke them out?"

"Yes. I'll send you up there, Baldy—you could obviously do it single-handed."

Doran coughed ostentatiously, and fanned the perimeter of the blue cloud away from his face. Cliff laughed.

Doran continued seriously: "We could, of course, pump poison gas into the caves. But if Magnus is still alive, that'll ensure that he won't be for long. And it may not even affect them. All we know about their respiration is that they certainly need oxygen. So perhaps a better idea is to pump all the oxygen *out* of the caves. Then their need to breathe will drive them to the hole, which is so small that they can get though it only one at a time. And, one at a time, we can handle them. At the moment, though, I'm leaving that as a last resort."

"Fair enough," Bruce admitted, satisfied at last. "Now, what about Malacante? You said the latest report from there was confusing."

The lines of worry appeared again on Doran's face.

"Malacante, yes. Ever been there, Baldy? No? The Continental Shelf is very narrow there, as all along the Spanish coast. But it's rich. The EP-40 flourishes on the sea-bottom there like grass in Wales."

"The EP-40?" echoed Bruce.

"Why don't you spacemen learn the language of the shrimps?—you're comrades in arms. It means Edible Plant, species Number Forty. You've probably eaten tons of it in sandwiches. 'Flacko,' it's called popularly. There are hundreds of acres of it off Malacante. They run out to the edge of the deep. It's dark at the edge—the sunlight can't reach down there. Plants need light. So we provided a good substitute for sunlight: a system of ultra-violet lamps laid

all along the edge, powered by cables from shore. The plantation overseer lives in a pressure dome on the bottom, near the edge—"

"I heard all about the first raid, at the council meeting," interrupted Bruce, testily. "I want to know what was confusing about the second."

Unruffledly, Doran said: "The overseer and his staff were caught by surprise by the first raid. It takes only one break in the circuit to put the whole lamp system out of function. But they knew it was no ordinary failure, for the cables were rattling around the dome as they were being dragged off. All they could do was sweep a vibrator beam around in the darkness, and hope the shock waves would hit the raider. Afterwards, they found the dead decapod."

"The second raid?" insisted Bruce, impatiently.

"The second time, they were ready. Following my suggestion, they'd rigged up an emergency searchlight, battery-powered. The moment the ultra-violets went out and the cable dragging began again, they switched on the search-light and scoured the area with it. They could see the lights being smashed, the cables being dragged and broken. Only—nothing bigger than a mackerel was in sight!"

Cliff and Bruce stared at Doran wordlessly.

"There was nothing to see but the destruction going on," said Doran. "They swept the whole vicinity with vibrator beams. And still the wrecking went on—somehow. Then suddenly it ended. When they went out later, the water was thick with dead fish—all small fry. There were no dead decapods this time, nothing which could have caused the damage. And if you don't find that confusing, I do."

Cliff said, presently: "The second time the decapods were a jump ahead of us."

"It appears so," said Doran.

Bruce said, pedantically: "We must try to get the whole picture clear in our minds. Then we may perceive a glimmer of light on what *is* happening. First, there *must* be Venusians, for they sent us a message in our sampler rocket. Second, they followed the sampler back to make sure that message was delivered. Third..."

He paused, thinking.

"Beyond that, it isn't so simple, is it?" said Doran. "Where is the Venusian ship now? On the Moon? Nobody's seen it there. Are the Venusians trying to take over our Lunar Bases to prevent us from ever starting for Venus, because they hold that their world is their world, and they don't want us in it? Are the Malacante raids the first tentative attacks on our food supplies? Will they try to starve us into helplessness? But if the Venusians are the decapods, and came in that ship, how did they get to Malacante in such an impossibly short time? As Magnus pointed out, the decapods couldn't have physically withstood the tremendous acceleration needed to get them from Moon to Earth in so few hours. Yet surely the Malacante trouble could only have been caused by decapods? There's the evidence of the dead one found directly following the first raid—a creature never before seen on Earth. Apparently an intelligent creature, too, with tremendous strength and a propensity for breaking cables, like the ones on the Moon. But then, again, how can such solid creatures make themselves invisible, as during the second Malacante raid—and impervious to the vibrator beam, though previously susceptible to it?"

"I don't know," said Bruce. "One can only presume their science is far in advance of ours—the thought-rod indicates that. The history of war shows that all weapons soon breed their counterparts in inventions of defence. The

decapods seem to have found the answer to the vibrator beam pretty smartly. Maybe they *can* make themselves invisible, though I doubt it. A completely invisible creature couldn't itself see anything. More likely they have some way of smashing objects invisibly at a distance—by force beams, say, whatever *they* might be. Maybe that explains why the vibrator didn't kill them the second time—they weren't there to be killed."

"All right, Baldy," said Doran. "Grant them their fantastic force beams—though I don't believe a word of it. Now explain why they didn't use them to smash up the signal apparatus in Base Two instead of doing it by hand—I mean, by tentacle?"

"I pass," said Beckworth Bruce.

Doran looked at Cliff. "Me too," said Cliff, hastily.

"Friend Magnus has a saying—from *Paradise Lost*, though probably he doesn't know it—'Confusion worse confounded,' " said Doran. "And that about sums it all up. Well, I'm hoping the Page brothers can do something towards sorting it out. Kenneth is now on his way to Malacante to try to get a line on the decapods. And Cliff here is off to the Moon on the same errand."

"Wh-what, sir?" stammered Cliff.

"I was sending up a rocket to collect Magnus and I've hurried it up," said Doran. "You leave in it tonight—at twenty-one fifteen hours—from the Salisbury Plain station. I'd hoped to spare you the trip. I'd hoped you'd be able to tell from the tape-film if the Moon decapods were identical with the Malacante ones or not. That is something we *must* establish to have any hope of unravelling this tangle. Your trip may do it, and it may not—that depends whether my trap at Two is going to snare you a specimen. I hope it will have done so by the time you get there—in four days' time. Now let's go back to the office."

They filed back. Doran motioned them to wait, and got busy with the Visis. He contacted the Adjutant at Lunar Base Two—he had no time for Smith—and ascertained that so far the tractors had reported no sign of the Venusian ship. Then, metaphorically, he made the round of the space-stations. They hadn't yet sighted anything on the Moon that hadn't been there before. He sighed, and got on to Salisbury to check that the Moon rocket would be able to leave on time and have accommodation for a passenger.

Then he told Cliff: "Okay, that's settled. You've a few hours to spare. You'd better make your own arrangements, and tell your family. Goodbye—and good luck."

He shook hands with Cliff, and detained Bruce: "I want to talk over the Venus trip with you."

As Cliff opened the door, he heard a voice from a Visi saying: "Can you accept a call from Winnipeg, Mr Doran? Colorado beetle trouble again..."

He closed the door to the sound of another of Doran's sighs.

Out in the sunny Square the loafers still loafed, and the fountains still splashed water around generously. The half-Moon still lay against the cloudless sky. Cliff glanced up at it. It was odd to think that in a few days he would be up there—looking up, still, but at Earth. He had never been into space, and wasn't anxious to make his maiden voyage. He half envied the loafers, until he remembered that no one idled in this world unless they were sick or disabled.

He walked off towards the Strand—and also towards what would be to him a new section of the battlefront.

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The next four days were for Cliff Page a little lifetime in themselves. The rocketship *Goddard* had carried him high above the darkling Plain, which, lying on his bunk, he

could see reflected in the adjustable mirrors at the portholes.

The distant twinkling lights of Salisbury itself came again into view, and dwindled to a small bright spot as he watched. It was night down there, but the *Goddard* drove steadily up and out into daylight once more as the sun began to peep above the great curve of the world.

And that great curve itself shrank slowly, until at last the complete globe of Earth was framed in the mirrors. Then the globe shrank slowly against a coal-black background on which innumerable stars gleamed like specks of diamond dust.

The *Goddard* revolved slowly on its longitudinal axis as it sped through space, pressing the occupants against the walls—which became the "floor" to them—by centrifugal force serving the purpose of gravity. They could walk about normally, and eating and drinking were no trouble.

The occupants numbered but three: Cliff, the pilot-navigator, and the engineer. The rest of the load consisted of stores for the Lunar Bases and some necessary equipment for the Venus expedition.

Towards the end of four strange days without dawn or sunset, the *Goddard*, sitting on its tail, braked its fall towards the Mare Nubium, and landed only a few miles from the domes of Base Two.

At Two, as Cliff knew now, no decapods, alive or dead, awaited his inspection. Throughout the trip the *Goddard* had kept in radio contact with both Lunar Bases and the Scientific Bureau back on Earth.

Following two days of waiting in vain for a decapod to walk into his trap at Two, Doran had ordered that the caves be sucked empty of oxygen. For two whole days now the powerful pump had been sucking away, with the bewildering result that the pressure of oxygen within the

caves remained exactly what it was before the pumping had started.

Nowhere else had free oxygen in any quantity been detected on the Moon. But from the abundance of it in this subterranean honeycomb, one might imagine the whole Moon was full of it—which was ridiculous.

Not a decapod had been seen or heard. Nor was there any word from Magnus.

Kenneth Page had now been four days in and around the undersea dome at Malacante, helping to re-lay the ultra-violet lighting system and carrying out his own investigations. He had reported that the broken cables were covered with a peculiar kind of thin slime, though he didn't know how, or even whether, that was connected with the decapods. And that was all he could discover which was in any way unusual.

No further raids had occurred. Kenneth had plastered the sea-bottom in that area with cameras placed to cover all angles, worked by remote control from the pressure dome. A huge emergency floodlight, which could light the sea for hundreds of yards around like day, had been installed. Now he was sitting and waiting for the next raid—if it ever came.

Doran was kind enough once to link the two brothers through the nerve system of the Bureau, and Cliff, in the *Goddard* three days out from Earth, could see in the Visi, and talk with, Kenneth in the dome under the sea off Spain. The image was poor, and Kenneth's face did in fact seem to be under water. But Kenneth made the same complaint about Cliff's appearance.

They ribbed each other without mercy, but parted with affection. For each thought the world of the other, and had done so since boyhood.

But, thought Cliff, as he transferred from the *Goddard*

to the tractor which had come for them, if Doran was relying on the Page brothers to solve the mystery of the decapods, he'd first better do something about producing a decapod—either here or at Malacante.

And then he sat back to stare like a child at the stern and wild lunar landscapes from ground level instead of from Earth or space, and to exchange comments on them with his companions. The tractor driver was sick of the Moon, homesick for Earth, and listened with a wry smile.

The tall shape of spaceship *Archimedes* came into view. Beside it stood a small replica of itself—the newly arrived ferry rocket from the space-station orbit.

The tractor driver indicated them with a grin: "Mother and child!"

A number of space-suited men were busy around the workshops, laying the foundations of the great crane which was to lift the small rocket on to the nose of *Archimedes*. Some members of the crane had already been fashioned from the handy Tychite. It was strange to see a single man balancing on his shoulder a girder which would have near crushed him on Earth.

The domes of Two now lifted above the crinkly horizon, and presently the tractor nudged its way into the airlock of one of them. The Adjutant was waiting on the far side.

"No decapods?" asked Cliff.

"No decapods," confirmed the Adjutant, quite cheerfully. "Between you and me, I hope we never set eyes on any more of the things." Then he sobered suddenly, and added: "But I can't take to the thought of not seeing anything more of Magnus. He was an awkward young cuss, spiky as a porcupine, but his heart was in the right place. And it was a stout heart too, believe me."

"You talk of him as if he were dead."

The Adjutant grimaced. “Do I? No reason to think that. He had plenty of grub and water with him.” But it was clear, nevertheless, that the Adjutant believed privately that Magnus would never be found alive, if found at all.

He introduced Cliff to Smith and Hamilton, who both apologized for the scarcity of decapods, and intimated that there wasn’t likely to be much of an opening for a marine biologist here. Indeed, the latter confided to Cliff that he thought the decapods had returned to Venus, either taking Magnus with them or leaving his body deep in the catacombs.

“But,” Cliff objected, “how could they? No ship’s been seen on the Moon yet, let alone to leave it.”

“Ah!” said Hamilton, knowingly. “But they can’t see the *back* of the Moon from the space-stations. And our tractors haven’t been that far round.”

He winked as though he had been given private information by the decapods. But Cliff was far from convinced.

He was shown his room, and had a wash and brush up before a meal with the others in the mess. Afterwards, he was taken on a sightseeing tour of the Base, including just a peep along the passage on the lowest level. Because it was forbidden to approach, he couldn’t see the hole itself, but he noted the thick Pipe now leading to it, back along which was being pumped the oxygen.

The disposition of the waiting groups of armed men was shown him, and their plan of action explained. But they were very bored men now, after more than four days of inaction without an alarm. They, too, inclined to the belief that the decapods had gone.

“I’m afraid it’s beginning to look like a waste of manpower,” commented the Adjutant to Cliff. “There’s a deuce of a lot of work to be done both here and outside

preparing for the Venus show—that's where they're really needed. The Commandant told me through the Visi only a couple of hours ago that if nothing happens soon, he's going to ask Doran if some of the men can be taken off duty."

After supper, Cliff said good night and returned to his room. There seemed nothing odd about saying good night, for although it was broad daylight outside, in the underground Base they could see nothing of it. The lunar calendar, with its two-week days, was ignored. Life here regulated itself by the twenty-four-hour clock of Earth. Bedtime was around twenty-three hundred hours, and you knew it not only by the clock but also by the fact that you felt tired.

Cliff yawned, and drew back the blankets. At which moment came a tap at the door. He grinned at a thought: do decapods tap politely?

But it was only the Adjutant again. He said: "I thought you might like to know that the Commandant's persuaded Doran that we need the guards back at work—all of them. So half of them have been taken off tonight, and tomorrow the rest will come off. I've just shut down the oxygen pump—we've given that up as a bad job."

"What happens when the last of the guard dismounts?"

The Adjutant looked away. "Then the hole will be sealed off."

"But—Magnus?"

"It's too bad. He served the Bureau so well—a good man. In fact, the best they had. Doran is terribly upset about it. I know—I got through to him myself afterwards. Tried to persuade him to let me take a last raiding party in there. He hesitated, and finally said that instead of one life lost it might mean dozens more also. He couldn't risk it. We need every pair of hands we can get on the Moon, and

there are too few as it is. The Venus expedition must go through. I could see it was near breaking his heart to abandon Magnus, though I'm beginning to believe, with the others, that he's dead. I think Doran believes it too, now. Anyhow, he made that decision, and once Doran has decided, an earthquake won't shake him."

"I see," said Cliff. "It seems there'll be no further need for me here."

"Hail and farewell, eh? Perhaps old Doran will send you to help your brother at Malacante."

"I hope so. Good night again."

"Night."

Cliff returned to his bed, but instead of getting in, he sat on it and reflected. He felt very depressed, and the seeming fruitlessness of his journey was not the whole cause. The C.I.D. men were a tough bunch, and Martin Magnus was reputed to be the toughest of them. Sooner or later the cards were bound to fall against them. They knew that. To them it was part of their job. Magnus would not have kicked against Doran's decision. In Doran's position—which, Cliff had heard, Magnus had hoped one day to be—Magnus would doubtless have made the same decision.

But it was hard.

Cliff sat remembering the tape-film he'd seen at the Bureau. That was the first time he had seen Magnus—and the last, it seemed. He smiled a little sadly at the memory of Magnus shying the tiny decapod across the cave. He wondered if there were many of such small specimens. Even he could handle one that size.

And then suddenly an idea possessed him. He sat up straight, considering it. If he could get hold of a specimen merely of that size, it would yet tell him all he—and Doran—needed to know.

And his last chance to do so was tonight.

There was another chance, however small, that he might find Magnus—injured, but alive.

There was yet another chance, which he refused to think about, that he might share the fate of Magnus.

He sat there weighing instead the chances of his coming across, in some crack or cranny, a small, undeveloped decapod, isolated, alone. Well, why not? It was possible. Worth the risk after coming across a quarter of a million miles of space, a journey otherwise for nothing.

But he wouldn't be foolish. He wouldn't go too far into the caverns, and he'd make sure he could find his way back to the entrance hole. If no baby decapods were reasonably near that hole, then they could go hang.

He waited another hour to let all those not on duty get to bed. Then, dressed again, he crept out and raided certain storerooms he'd noted on his tour. From one he took a corded hammock, first cutting off unwanted parts. That would do fine as a sort of reticule in which to carry a baby decapod, should he be lucky enough to find one. From another he took a powerful hand-torch. And from Hamilton's signal store he took a half-mile drum of fine, but tough, wire.

The tricky part now was to evade the guard. Knowing the locations of the posts was a great help. So was the fact that half of them were now unmanned. The remainder of the guards had lost interest in their duty, and were anything but alert. Indeed, the only guard he actually saw on the journey to the lower levels was asleep.

Then he was at the lowest level of all, in the passage leading to the hole. The oxygen pipe, no longer serving any other purpose, directed him straight to it: it had been inserted through the wall but a yard from the hole. The sight of the hole itself, round and black, rather daunted

him. He reflected uncomfortably that it wouldn't be easy to get out through it in a hurry.

He tied one end of the wire to the pipe. Then he took a deep breath, tried to stop thinking about decapods of any size, and scrambled through the hole into darkness.

The oxygen hit him at once and made his head swim. It was only temporarily. His professional duties had often required him to endure long periods on the sea-bottom in a diving-suit, and he'd found that pure oxygen, taken slowly, kept him going far longer than compressed air. So he soon adjusted himself to the cavern's heady atmosphere.

He tied the mutilated hammock firmly about his waist. Then, paying out the wire with one hand and shining the torch round him with the other, he advanced resolutely across the cave. He wasn't yet quite used to the leaden-soled shoes he had to wear, and their clinking on the rock floor both annoyed and scared him.

He had mixed feelings, too, about the cracks in the floor. He was glad to see some were wide enough to form likely retreats for tiny decapods, On the other hand, if he weren't careful he could easily step in one and sprain an ankle—and he would hate to be in this place able only to crawl.

He maintained a tight grip on the wire, keeping it taut, for that led the way back to safety.

The hole, with the faint illumination from the passage lamps, became smaller and smaller behind him, until at last when he turned his head he could mark the spot no longer. He had reached the far wall now and began carefully examining the crevices in it.

He plodded on and on, and saw no sign of any living thing.

Apart from the sound of his own breathing, and the faint clinking of his soles, dead silence lay everywhere.

Presently he had paid out half the wire and so was a quarter of a mile from the hole. Yet this was only half as far as Magnus had gone before he encountered the decapods. Therefore he felt, irrationally, that he was still within the bounds of safety.

Until he felt a sharp tug at the taut wire.

His stomach seemed to turn over. He switched off his torch at once.

Something must have blundered into the wire—behind him, back there somewhere between him and the hole. Something certainly bigger than a baby decapod.

He felt the moisture of cold sweat on his forehead. His hands began to tremble. So did the wire in one of them. And it was trembling even more than his hand was. Something heavy was feeling its way along the wire—the wire which led straight to him.

Hastily he set the drum on the ground. The moment he let go of it, he half regretted the action, for immediately he heard the drum begin to slide slowly away from him over the rock surface.

Then it stopped sliding.

He peered uselessly into the utter blackness. He had a mad urge to start running, but already he had lost his sense of direction. Anyhow, to run across this fissured floor in the dark would be just asking for that sprained ankle. And then the thing would have him at its mercy.

Perhaps if he remained perfectly still and silent, the thing would miss him in the dark and pass him. And then the way back to the hole would be free—if he could find the wire again.

He stood rigid, holding his breath and wishing his heart wouldn't thump so wildly—and listening. On the wall of darkness his imagination drew the fearsome shapes of great decapods. Then they seemed to come alive, and close in on

him. He felt he must scream. And yet he must not utter a sound.

He became possessed by the terrifying thought that though he couldn't see the thing, it could see him.

Then all his thoughts seemed to freeze together in a blind panic as he actually heard the thing, advancing through the dark. The faint clicking, as of jointed legs. Nearer, nearer.

Directly towards him.

5

THE STORY OF THE DECAPODS

A VOICE said politely from the darkness: “Pardon me, but am I right for Trafalgar Square?”

At this moment even Martin Magnus’s saw-edged voice sounded sweet to Cliff. Keeping his own voice steady with an effort, he answered: “No, I’m afraid you’ve taken the wrong turning.”

He switched on his torch. It was undoubtedly Magnus, gaunt unshaven jaws chewing gently.

“I’m Magnus,” said Magnus, unnecessarily.

“ ‘They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead.’ ”

“Only slightly,” said Magnus. “What are you doing in these parts?”

“Looking for a baby decapod.”

“There’s only one, my friend, and it’s a long way from here, tucked in its cot. Its Ma and Pa wouldn’t like you to disturb it. I’d like to get to bed myself. I presume the way out is in the other direction along the wire?”

“Yes.”

“I tossed up which direction to take when I ran into it, but I never win a toss. Are you coming—or staying here?”

“I’m coming,” said Cliff, quickly.

Magnus began to follow the wire, and Cliff followed Magnus. He realized that the faint clicking he had heard, and which he should have recognized, was the sound of Magnus’s leaden soles.

"By the way," Magnus flung over his shoulder, "what's the set-up outside? Am I likely to get my head shot off if I stick it out of the hole?"

"No. But we must be careful. There's a guard along the high levels."

"They'll be no trouble—they know you're down here."

"No, they don't." Cliff explained.

"Oh, so Doran was going to wall me up alive, eh—without even a drop of Amontillado?"

"He thought you dead."

"Did you?"

"I wasn't sure."

"Were you looking for me or for decapods?"

"Both."

"Well, that's real nice of you. Who are you, and how came you here?"

By the time Cliff had finished telling him, they were at the hole. Magnus went through it first. "No one around," he called back, and Cliff scrambled through. Magnus went striding up the passage, and Cliff had to hurry to keep up with him.

"How did you escape from the decapods?" asked Cliff, rather breathlessly.

Magnus frowned, and began slapping his thigh gently as he walked with a thin bundle of wires he was carrying.

He said, gruffly: "Do you mind containing your curiosity until I can issue an explanation to all and sundry? It's quite a tale."

They continued, ever upwards, until Cliff whispered: "There's a post just round this corner. If we take that other turning we can dodge the guards altogether."

Magnus's frown deepened. "What—and have 'em all hauled up on the carpet for dereliction of duty? They've been waiting for me long enough as it is."

He stuck his head round the corner and bawled: “Wake up there! Let’s have you!”

The shocked guards came tumbling out from an office, still more asleep than awake.

Magnus addressed them solemnly: “Gentle knights, we seek audience with thy leader—conduct us thence.”

“Magnus!” It was a ragged chorus.

Magnus rubbed his thickly bristled chin. “Curse it, you’ve penetrated my disguise!”

There was laughter and a faint cheer. Magnus was popular with the men. They crowded around, asking excited questions.

“Later, folks,” he said, good-humouredly. “I must get a report off to the Bureau right away. I’ll tell you this, though: you’ve nothing to fear from the decapods. And—this is important—don’t attempt to harm them. Now, let’s get moving.”

Magnus himself moved quickly, and got everything else moving. Smith, the Adjutant, and Hamilton were all roused from their beds, and came hurrying to Smith’s office where Magnus was trying to contact Doran on the Visi.

“Magnus, where the devil have you been?”

“Good heavens, Magnus is back!”

Magnus gave them a grin and a mock salute and returned his attention to the Visi. Doran’s features were just appearing, though Cliff didn’t recognize them at once. Sunspots were causing as much trouble as ever to the TV beam, but they weren’t wholly to blame. Doran’s usually immaculately combed hair was a white tangle. His eyes were mere slits. His cheeks were sunken and his mouth looked slack. When he spoke, his voice also was unrecognizable.

“For heavensh shake, Magnush, can’t you let a man

shleep? Itsh the middle of the night."

"Very well, the decapods can wait till morning," said Magnus, suavely.

"No, darn you—jusht let me find my teeth." Doran, looking harassed, ducked out of the field of his bedside Visi, and reappeared a minute later roughly resembling his old self. He'd smoothed his hair, rubbed his sleepy eyes properly open, and retrieved his dentures.

"All right, let's hear about the Venusians," he said.

"The Venusians?" said Magnus, innocently. "I don't know anything about the Venusians."

"What? Didn't you mention the decapods?"

"Sure I did. But they're not Venusians."

The gasp that ran round the office was echoed after the three seconds' time lag by Doran.

"Just lie back on the pillow and make yourself comfy—it's a long story," said Magnus. And then, in his odd cracked voice, he told it, and his audience both on the Moon and on Earth heard it through without interruption.

When the decapods seized Magnus they could easily have crushed him to death. Instead, they carried him away without more than bruising him. Away deep into the cavernous system under the lunar surface. The walls of the deeper caverns were covered with luminous fungi which emitted a dim but steady light. When Magnus's eyes became adjusted to it, he could see, if but poorly.

Decapods, it seemed, had cats' eyes. Like a cat, they couldn't see in total darkness, and had to feel their way. But their eyes could make the most of only a little light.

Finally they carried him into an enormous cavern, and then suddenly released him and retreated some yards, so that they stood around him in a semi-circle. He looked before him, away from them, and found he was standing on the edge of a very flat, glassily smooth area. Then he

noticed beneath that glassy floor small pallid lights moving. He was puzzled by them until a suspicion struck him.

He knelt, reached forward, and touched the surface with his fingers. It was water. He was on the edge of a dead calm underground lake. The shapes moving within it, he guessed, were luminous fish.

The decapods stood motionless, as if awaiting his reaction to the water.

He stood up, and cautiously tasted his wet finger-tips. It was salt water. It was no real surprise to find water at this level, for that had been discovered by the borings. In fact, this lake was probably the source of the water which had been pumped up for use as propellant in the Earth-Moon atomic spaceships—indeed, the tanks of the great *Archimedes* itself had doubtless been filled from this very lake.

He faced the silent decapods—a grisly ring in the pale light—and threw his arms wide, questioningly. He asked aloud: "Well, what do you expect me to do—jump in?"

They all stood there, Magnus said, like dummies for a couple of minutes. Then, as at some unnoticed signal, all of them except one sidled past him into the water. The tiny decapod went with them. Scarcely causing a ripple, they vanished beneath the surface, went down among the faint clouds of luminous fish.

Magnus faced the remaining one. It was slightly bigger than the others, and possibly that made him think—quite rightly, as it turned out—that this was the leader.

He had lost his gun in the struggle far back—there was no sign of it around.

The decapod, all its eyes watching him, settled gently back on its four back legs and as gently waved the

foremost six at him. The movements were familiar, for this was how the decapod had behaved when he first encountered it—this was probably the same one. He guessed it was trying to address him in sign language.

How to reply? He was no Hindu god—he had but two arms. In any case, how could he possibly learn the sign language in this barren place, where there was precious little to point to and associate signs with?

Suddenly, the decapod's six arms pointed to the water and remained pointing to it.

Magnus looked at the water and wondered if he were being directed to follow the rest of the company. And in that moment a question rose into his mind, not precisely phrased, but roughly of the intent: "Why do you take our water?"

At once he became excited. Such a question could only have come telepathically from the decapod. To cut a long story short, said Magnus, it had. But he couldn't telepath back to the creature. Decapods have a different kind of mind from ours. They seem to have complete control of their subconscious, whereas we are largely at the mercy of ours.

Telepathy can occur only as a transfer of a thought from one subconscious mind to another. A thought enters the human consciousness by way of the subconscious, and can leave it only in the same way. A human straining to send a thought-message by repeating it in his mind succeeds only in retaining it in the forefront of his consciousness. And when he forgets it, and lets it slip into his subconscious, he loses control of it. But a decapod can keep control of any thought in any part of its mind.

The upshot was that Magnus learnt words and simple phrases in the sign language through the decapod holding its limbs in the appropriate juxtaposition while at the same

time it telepathed the thought they represented. The rough outline of the thought depended upon the angles to one another at which the limbs were held. The subtler nuances of expression were conveyed by the limbs being curved or twisted slightly this way or that.

Magnus had a photographic memory, and soon stored a hundred or more of such fragments for future use—for the decapod indicated that somehow Magnus would be able to employ them.

Presently, another decapod appeared from the water, deposited a small wire spray (which Magnus now exhibited to his audience), and vanished again in the depths. The spray was fashioned from six short lengths of copper wire (by courtesy of Hamilton, said Magnus with a grin, for obviously they were a souvenir from the raid on the communications room). The six wires could be bent to form fair imitations of the decapod's visual signals.

Now conversation could begin.

It was necessarily a long and painfully slow business. Magnus lost all track of time. He was glad he'd brought fresh water, for the lake was salty. His supply of concentrated food—and, of course, the inevitable gum—kept him going. However, there were long periods during which he slept from sheer exhaustion. He was surprised when he learned just how many days he had been down there.

Magnus said he would make a detailed report of the conversation later, but the gist of the information he acquired was this:

The decapods were natives of the Moon—indeed, had never left it. They were an extremely ancient race, which flourished when the Moon had an atmosphere and a sea. But the atmosphere leaked away over millions of years, into space, and the sea shrank: this salty underground lake

was the sole known residue from it. Perforce, the decapod race had to shrink numerically with it, and were now near extinction. There was but a handful of them left.

They needed little sustenance, yet their life-span was some five hundred years. But they had almost ceased to breed. The tiny decapod was the solitary very young member of the species, and therefore it was very precious to them.

They were intelligent and wise creatures, but not very practical. Their life was a life of the mind, and in a sense they shared one great mind between them, for they were natural telepaths.

They were really only at home in the water, but they could exist for long periods out of it—so long as there was oxygen to breathe.

Originally, the lunar sea was oxygenated by the atmosphere dissolving in it. But at last the atmosphere became too thin. The decapods retreated underground and used the heat of the Moon's internal fires for releasing oxygen from the oxidized rocks. (They also used this heat for metal working and making simple tools—like chisels.) Thus they created their own atmosphere of pure oxygen. Their method of doing so was so effective that they easily replenished the oxygen as fast as the men from Earth had pumped it away.

But they couldn't replenish the water. And the unknown invaders of their world had been pumping that away steadily also. They feared that the invaders were deliberately robbing them of the precious, life-giving fluid. Something had to be done to stop it.

So the leader broke through into the Base, to investigate this strange artificial dwelling of the invaders, who to him looked the queerest kind of monsters.

But he couldn't read their thoughts. He suspected

therefore that they were purposely closing their minds to him, didn't want to communicate with him, especially as they made no endeavour to respond to his signs. Instead, they seemed to be stricken with fear. He thought that if they became frightened so easily, he might be able to frighten them away from the Base altogether. Yet he didn't wish to harm them.

It was plain that Smith was communicating to another of his kind through the Visi. To smash their communications system might itself be enough to scare them away. So he smashed Smith's Visi, followed its cable to the communications room, and wreaked havoc there.

But later, when Magnus came hunting them, the decapod realized he'd failed. He decided to make one more attempt, on his own, to communicate, but again he was confronted with a closed mind and no response.

Then Magnus advanced on him, and the decapod abandoned the idea of trying to communicate. It seemed that it was to be a choice of kill or be killed. So Magnus was advancing towards his death.

Then suddenly the whole situation was changed by chance. For the baby decapod, sensing vaguely what was in the minds of its elders, suddenly decided to attack Magnus itself.

Magnus could have smashed the baby with his rifle butt. Instead, he returned it unharmed to its kind.

This surprised the decapods and stayed their action. Magnus had spared their idol. They could only spare his life in return. The leader reasoned that if the invaders knew the meaning of mercy, then there was yet hope that the two races might live in peace.

Therefore, he saw to it that Magnus was captured alive and taken to a safe place where another attempt at communication could be made. This time it was successful.

“Do the decapods know anything about the Venusians?” asked Doran.

“Nothing,” said Magnus. “I’m now of the opinion that the Venusian ship didn’t land on the Moon.”

“So am I. Either it returned to Venus—or else it landed somewhere here on Earth. Yet no one’s reported seeing it. I can’t help wondering if the decapod which was killed at Malacante was a Venusian. If so, judging by the trouble there afterwards, it had some companions who must still be alive.”

“Has there been any more trouble there?” asked Magnus.

“No,” said Doran. “Things seem to have quietened down. Kenneth Page is still investigating the area.”

“Has he found any clues?”

“Not a thing, really. He did say the broken cables, which the creatures must have handled, were covered with a thin slime of a kind he’d not seen before. But then, most sea creatures are pretty slimy, so I don’t think that means much.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Magnus. “If it’s the same kind of thin slime that’s on the thought-rod, then it’s a thousand to one that the Venusians are at Malacante.”

“What’s that?” asked Doran, testily. “No one told me about any slime on the thought-rod.”

Cliff noticed that Smith, Hamilton, and the Adjutant were exchanging uneasy glances.

“I’d have told you all about it if you and the Commandant had let me examine it when I asked,” said Magnus, crushingly. “However, I’ll look at it when I get back to Base One.”

“I’m afraid you won’t,” said Doran. “The Commandant sent it to Two for Hamilton to examine. Hamilton, tell Magnus what happened,”

Hamilton's red face became even redder than normal. Magnus frowned ferociously at him. "Well?"

Hamilton mumbled: "It was obvious that the mechanism was inside the rod, so I opened it."

"In a vacuum chamber?"

"No. I—"

"Thrice accursed fool!" yelled Magnus. "Porridge-head! What did you think it was—a Christmas cracker? Were you looking for the motto?"

Hamilton recoiled under the attack. "I did it as carefully as possible," he said, defensively. "I used a saw blade with the finest teeth, at a point only a quarter of an inch from one end—I didn't want to cut the mechanism in two. But I'd made only a few strokes when suddenly the whole rod exploded into a cloud of fine dust."

"Where's the dust?"

"It all drifted away."

Magnus seemed to be counting under his breath. Then he said, in a sort of strained calm: "I suspected the rod might spring a self-destroying action if one tried to pry into it, for the Venusians seem to be a cagey lot. Maybe it was a crystalline thing, holding together only lightly, with a vacuum inside, and the sudden inrush of air blew it apart. Maybe the tiny vibrations of the saw did it. We've lost what might have been a real clue. Oh, well, it can't be helped now."

"That's right," said Doran. "Forget it, Magnus. I take it your decapod friends won't bother us any more if we don't bother them?"

"That's correct."

"But we still need to draw on their water supply for propellant. That threatens to become a worsening problem."

"I've got permission to refuel the ferry rocket, at least,

tonight," said Magnus. "Then I'm starting back to Earth tomorrow."

Doran's eyebrows rose. "So? H'm. Well, I suppose you might as well. I'd like a full personal report on the decapods' history, habits, and so forth. Bring young Cliff Page back with you—we may need him at Malacante."

Cliff brightened at this prospect of rejoining Ken.

"All right," said Magnus. "Don't let the water problem keep you awake. Leave it to Magnus. I've an idea that may solve it. Likewise I've an idea may give us a line on these shy Venusians. I'll tell you when I see you—'bye till then."

"Good night, Magnus. Adjutant—will you see the *Goddard* begins fuelling up at once?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right." Doran's image faded.

Magnus looked around the group in the office. "Well, gentlemen, I trust you feel a bit easier about the decapods now. You can return to your beds without fear that you'll be murdered in them."

The Adjutant said, gloomily: "I must report all this to the Commandant first—and then fuel that darned rocket."

Smith said: "I'll dismount the remainder of the guard."

Hamilton said: "I think I need a drink."

They drifted out.

Magnus smiled rather mysteriously at Cliff. "So we'll be travelling companions tomorrow, eh? Don't be surprised if there's another passenger."

He would say no more, and Cliff went to bed still wondering who the extra passenger might be.

• • • • •

When Cliff awoke he gazed sleepily at the bedside

clock, and then sat up suddenly. He had overslept by more than two hours. He washed, shaved, and dressed hurriedly, and hastened to the mess.

The only occupant was Hamilton, pushing a piece of bread around an eggy plate with a fork.

"Is Magnus up yet?" asked Cliff.

Hamilton put the dripping morsel carefully in his mouth, but not carefully enough. Wiping his chin, he answered: "Magnus? He's been up and around for hours. Your breakfast is on the hot-plate there. Better get it down —Magnus should be back any minute now."

"Back?"

"He took a trip out to the *Goddard*."

"Oh," said Cliff, getting his breakfast. "Why?"

Hamilton put his hands over his ears. "I didn't hear you. As a matter of fact, officially no one at the Base knows what Magnus has been up to. We've all gone deaf, blind, and dumb. Magnus doesn't want anything to leak back to the Bureau. For once, we're playing along with him. We think he's earned the right—"

The door opened and in came Magnus.

"So you *are* up, young fellow. The tractor's ready when you're ready, and the *Goddard* is raring to go."

"What about the other passenger?" asked Cliff, through a mouthful of cereal.

"He's sitting in the ship, all set, just waiting for us," said Magnus cheerfully, and winked at Hamilton.

"All right," said Cliff. "I can see it's some sort of gag, and everyone's in on it except me. I shan't keep you long. Then perhaps I'll be allowed to meet the fellow."

When, a little later, Cliff entered the *Goddard* and met the waiting third passenger, he had the surprise of his life.

• • • • •

Doran was having a quietish morning. There was some trouble with icebergs drifting down into and disrupting one of the North Atlantic plankton farms. It was easy to stop those on the way with small atomic bombs. But, plainly, the ones already in the sea of plankton couldn't be atomized without destroying the harvest also. Luckily, he was able to melt them with thermite and lose only a few acres of plankton in the process.

Famine had broken out again like boils all over India. But this was a recurrent phenomenon. There were only routine steps to take, and he had taken them.

The blank Visis stared at him like a row of fishes' eyes. He looked over them, idly, through the window at Trafalgar Square. His attention was taken immediately by numbers of people hurrying across the Square towards the Bureau building. Something, it seemed, had happened outside the building. A street accident, probably.

He went to the window and looked down. There was a knot of people at the main entrance just parting to allow a big van to drive away. They closed in again about the door.

So it wasn't an accident. Merely a celebrity arriving. It happened often enough. He wondered whether it was the Prime Minister again, and whether he had come to consult the S.I.D. or some other department.

Doran wasn't much interested, and rang for a second cup of tea. As he sat awaiting it, the door opened slowly and the tall, lean figure of Martin Magnus sauntered in unannounced. He was puffing aromatic blue clouds from a long, thin cigar and looking unusually cheerful.

Doran was genuinely pleased to see him. "Come right in, Magnus," he invited, a little too late. "Let's have that report."

Magnus stopped on the edge of the carpet.

"Mind if I bring a couple of pals in?"

"Not at all," said Doran, heartily.

Cliff Page came in, smiling. Doran smiled back, nodding pleasantly.

Then, brushing the lintel of the door, entered a full-grown decapod—a round head and attenuated body balanced on a forest of thin black legs.

Doran's smile died on his lips, while Cliff's and Magnus's broadened. The decapod regarded Doran with its full battery of eyes, while Doran stared back with eyes that seemed, imitatively, also to be coming out on stalks.

"I told you I'd bring one back alive to see you—remember?" said Magnus, gently. "This is the leader of the decapods, come as ambassador for his kind."

Doran looked at him dazedly, and then back at the decapod. He remained dumb.

Cliff closed the door quietly.

"Aren't you going to offer the ambassador a chair, Doran?" asked Magnus, knocking the ash from his cigar.

"Er—" was all Doran could manage.

Cliff and Magnus drew up chairs for themselves, and the decapod sank slowly into a nest of its own legs on the carpet.

"Well, let's get down to business," said Magnus, briskly. "How much leave do I get?"

Doran made an attempt to pull himself together. "Will you settle for seven days?" he asked, huskily.

"Two weeks," said Magnus, flatly.

"But you're needed in half a dozen different places..." Doran trailed off.

"Two weeks," said Magnus, "and you can have the decapod story entire—from source." He motioned with his cigar to the quiescent decapod.

Doran gulped. "All right."

From an inside pocket, Magnus produced the wire

spray. Cliff watched amusedly, and Doran wide-eyed, as Magnus made a few signs with it to the decapod, who spared one eye to absorb them and kept the other two focused mercilessly on Doran.

"Now," said Magnus, when he'd finished and apparently received a silent answer, "if you'll just sit back quietly and relax, Doran, you'll find the decapod telling you his story in his own thoughts. If you want to ask any questions, ask me, and I'll relay them by sign language."

Doran nodded, still a little dazed, and the strange and largely silent palaver began. It was interrupted only once, by the entry of the coolly cheerful secretary, Olivia, who brought tea for the three men. She was not at all disconcerted by the presence of the decapod, which she seemed to regard as no more than a pet which the notoriously eccentric Magnus had brought along.

Doran took the opportunity to tell her that his deputy, Krasnowitcz, was to handle all Visi calls for the time being.

Cliff welcomed this brief interlude. He would much rather sit looking at the petite Olivia than at the far from beautiful decapod squatting on the floor. He respected the decapod's intelligence and gentle, helpful character. But he had been caged up in the small cabin of the *Goddard* with the creature for four days. He knew by heart the long but almost eventless history of the decapod race. And the niceties of their endless philosophical discussions were lost on him.

The decapods had never known wars, revolutions, great art, or momentous scientific discoveries, and their opportunities for adventurous exploration had been limited by the barrenness of the Moon. Compared with the turbulent life of man, theirs had been a dull existence.

Their life-span was five times as long as the best Cliff

could expect, but he would not for the world change places with any of them. Man was man, and decapod was decapod —to each his own sphere.

At last Doran declared himself *au fait* with the past of this older, wiser, gentler race and, man-like, returned to the problems of the future.

He said: "Well, we've settled something. We can have access to the decapods' lake for propellant until we've built enough heavy Tychite machinery to extract water from the lunar crust by crushing. In time we may be able to supply sufficient water for ourselves and decapods alike."

"There's another angle to that which I've discussed with the decapod," said Magnus. "Why shouldn't we offer them the hospitality of our own seas?—heaven knows we've plenty to spare. Four or five *Goddard*-type rockets could ferry the whole surviving race here. In return, they could help us with our undersea farms, explore the sea-bottoms for us—they can reach depths where we are practically helpless. I'm sure there's intelligent life somewhere in the Abyss—they could contact it for us, act as mediators."

Doran rubbed his chin. "H'm. As you say—why not? They're willing to do this?"

"Yes, if we'll let them."

"Good. That'll solve quite a few problems. Magnus, I think you're the very man for this murderous, ulcer-breeding job of mine."

"Any time," said Magnus. "Any time you feel like retiring."

Doran grinned. "I intend to use you as a stooge and pick your brains for just as long as I can swing it."

Magnus looked meaningly at Cliff. "Make a note of that, young man—and take warning. Doran sits like an elephant on a great heap of squirming deluded protégés.

They have the ulcers, and he has the power. Never, never, never let him get his hooks into you too. Go back to Plymouth, and stick to your shrimp-fishing—and forget ambition."

The decapod squatted there patiently, regarding them. The mind of man was a world barred against it, and even if it knew what went on in that strange cloudy place, it was doubtful if it would ever really begin to understand it. A decapod's thought processes were complex but well-ordered. Its emotions were simple and straightforward. But man's emotion patterns were complex, and his thought processes rather shallow and confused—very nearly the complete opposite.

"Seriously—" began Doran.

"I *was* serious," Magnus interjected.

"—the decapods might be able to help us with the Malacante mystery," continued Doran, unperturbed. "If, as it seems, Venusian-type decapods are at the bottom of it, then maybe the lunar-type decapods can contact them telepathically and find out what the devil they think they're up to."

Magnus looked injured. "Now you're stealing my ideas before I even mention 'em!"

"No, I'm just catching up with you. A few days ago you said you had an idea for getting a line on the Venusians. It's just occurred to me what that idea might be."

"You've hit it. Here's my plan. By now the ambassador here must be feeling like a decapod out of water. He needs the feel of the sea about him again. Tomorrow let him swim out to Malacante, starting from, say, Dover. It'll serve a double purpose: he'll be able to learn whether our seas will be suitable for his kind, and on the way he might also learn something about the Venusians—if they're still

around."

"How will he find the way to Malacante?"

"Simple. Send a slow motor-launch there at the same time. He can follow it at leisure. It could trail a submerged silk net of the conical kind—that would help him to keep track of it."

"You seem to have thought it out pretty thoroughly, Magnus. Have you also thought who's going to accompany him in the launch?"

"No, but I know it's not going to be me!"

"Okay—you can have your fortnight's leave undisturbed, whatever happens—I promise you." Doran turned to Cliff, his eyes twinkling. "No doubt you'd like to join your brother at Malacante, Page?"

"Sure," said Cliff, eagerly.

Magnus groaned. "Didn't I warn you, Cliff? Can't you see he's welcoming you in with gently smiling jaws? Don't let yourself get entangled with the S.I.D, or you'll never have a private life again. They'll steal your soul away. And you can go fry on Mercury or freeze on Pluto while they sit here drinking tea and flirting with their blonde secretaries."

Doran smiled broadly. "Don't heed him, young man. He's a case apart—he was born with a grouch against life. I'll be really sorry for the S.I.D. men when he sits in this chair."

"By then I may be one of them," said Cliff, seriously.

Magnus went through the motions of tearing his hair out by the roots, then turned to the decapod wringing his hands helplessly. The creature watched him, all eyes, alert for a sign message.

Magnus picked up the wire spray and did some rapid semaphoring. Whether he was bringing the decapod up to date with the discussion or whether he was merely conveying disgust at the perfidity of the old and the

stupidity of the young, he never explained.

Doran asked Cliff: “Would you like to make a flying visit home first? I could arrange a special ’plane.”

“Thanks all the same, sir, but it’s not worth going all that way for just one night. I’ll stay in London, at an hotel.”

Doran nodded. “As you wish. Remember to send us the bill. Somehow, I don’t think the ambassador is going to be very comfortable at an hotel. I must think of some sort of accommodation—”

“I’ve already fixed it,” interrupted Magnus. “He’s the guest of the Royal Zoological Society. They’re loaning him a nice roomy aquarium and providing full board—and plenty of flattering attention. They’ve also loaned a plain van for transport—it’s waiting in the parking place around the corner now. We raised quite a sensation when we arrived.”

“So I noticed,” said Doran. “Have you explained to the decapod about Malacante?”

“Yes. He’s willing to start tomorrow.”

“Good. At last we’ve a chance of getting somewhere. Please convey to him my thanks, my pleasure at meeting him, my hopes that he will find our seas to his liking, and my anticipation of meeting him again. And then for heaven’s sake escort him back to the Zoo.”

When this was done, the meeting broke up. Cliff felt rather at a loose end, and volunteered to help Magnus install the decapod comfortably at the Zoo. They had some laughs over it, but none the less were glad when they were able to escape afterwards into the freedom of Regent’s Park.

They walked across the grass in silence for a while. Then Magnus asked suddenly: “What hotel will you stay at?”

“I haven’t thought,” said Cliff. “Can you recommend

one? To tell you the truth, I'm a stranger in London."

Magnus named several hotels, then added idly: "Of course, as it's only for one night, you could stay at my house if you like. There's a spare bedroom. It's not a bad little house, but the district is—well, not a rich one. At least, not rich in money. But it has a richness in association for me that is worth more than money."

Cliff was surprised, but gratified. "Thank you very much. I'd like to, if I shan't be in the way."

"I live alone," said Magnus. "And you won't be in my way."

They reached the Outer Circle and a taxi came bowling along among the traffic. Magnus flagged it.

"Sycamore Lane, Bermondsey," he told the driver, and they climbed in.

6

IN SYCAMORE LANE

THE taxi bore them eastwards, through the City, crossing the river by old Tower Bridge, and eastwards again into dockland.

To Plymouth-born Cliff, the yards, the high iron gates, the cranes against the sky, the small bridges spanning narrow streets that were no more than the spaces between the walls of towering warehouses, the innumerable gibbet-like hoists, the cobbles and cellar flaps and peculiar spicy smells, were all part of a familiar world. So were the ships themselves, tall in the distance, standing shoulder to shoulder with the warehouses and far overtopping the streets of little dwelling houses. But here in the Surrey Docks the ships were even bigger than those which called at Plymouth, and he saw among them some of the old-fashioned funnelled types, still running on steam and coal in the atomic age.

What seemed odd to him was to find the sea in the heart of London. One was always forgetting that London, as well as being the capital city, a cathedral city, a university city, a business city, a city of antiquity and a city of play, was also still the world's greatest port.

The mystery which now intrigued him was why Martin Magnus—whose S.I.D. post must be a very well-paid one—should shun those other cities-within-the-city and choose to live alone in this busy and far from salubrious area. And, indeed, why he loved it, as it was plain to see he did.

Magnus was sitting on the edge of his seat, puffing at his cigar, and gazing eagerly first through this window, then through that, concerned not to miss seeing anything they passed. His brown eyes were alight with life, and he smiled continuously. He was happy and excited.

The cab drove swiftly past some bulky blocks of flats, and then turned into a short street which was half shops and half small private houses, and burstingly alive with a street market. The stalls were jam-packed along both kerbs and, just as tightly packed, the bargain-hunters pressed slowly along the display. They stared, remarked, grinned and pointed as the stall-holders exhorted them to buy their unparalleled wares. The hubbub was constant. The street was a slash of colour in the grey surroundings under the grey sky. Lengths of silk of glaring scarlet or blue hung beside bright yellow bunches of bananas. Piles of oranges stood against a background of fresh green cabbages. A stall selling nothing but mirrors reflected its lights a thousand times. A stall displaying the garish covers of a hundred different magazines had a neighbour exhibiting in riotous colour twenty different kinds of flowers.

It was Petticoat Lane concentrated in a smaller space.

The taxi didn't attempt to thrust into it. The driver realized what was possible and what was quite impossible. He announced through his little microphone: "Sycamore Lane, sir."

"As if I didn't know!" muttered Magnus under his breath, gazing fondly around him. He clapped a hand suddenly on Cliff's knee. "Laddie," he said, aloud, "this is *life*!"

He climbed springily out of the cab and paid the driver. Cliff emerged more slowly. He'd never seen any place quite like this.

Suddenly they were waist-deep in yelling children.

"It's Maggie!" they shrilled. "Good old Maggie! Maggie from Mars! Maggie from the Moon! Tell us a story, Maggie! Caught any monsters, Maggie? Go on, tell us!"

Magnus lost his cigar in the scrum, but he was grinning from ear to ear. He pulled handful after handful of sweets from his pockets and they disappeared faster than he could produce them. Cliff received some curious though friendly looks, and felt a little out of things.

Now many of the stall-holders came pushing among the children, extending hands to Magnus and beaming as widely as he.

"Wotcher, Martin! 'Ow's fings? You're lookin' rosy. Come and 'ave a pint."

For many, many years the TV had spoken impeccable English to these people. They had all had the benefit of a sound education. But there were still districts of London where the cultured approach broke its head and its heart against the stubborn-rooted Cockney accent and earthy values. Bermondsey was one of them.

Magnus greeted them all by name, but smilingly refused their invitations. He kept introducing Cliff to them, and Cliff found himself smiling foolishly, nodding like a mandarin, and shaking a forest of hands. All the time, Magnus was quietly manoeuvring him to the door of a trim, bright-painted little house, and suddenly Cliff found himself with Magnus behind that door, which was now shut against the throng.

"Phew!" said Magnus. "Welcome home, eh? But how grand it is to be back!"

He led the way down the short hall to a surprisingly spacious room at the rear, where a wide window opened on to a stone-flagged court surrounded by high brick walls, over which could be seen nothing but the sky, a couple of

distant, enormous cranes, and a tall neighbouring lamp-standard.

Two walls of the room were entirely covered with packed bookshelves. There was a deep crimson carpet, two capacious armchairs with loose covers, a cocktail cabinet, a tape-player, and an oak sideboard.

"This," said Magnus, "is my sanctuary. You'll notice there's no Visi. Would you like a drink?"

"I sure would," said Cliff. "Thanks."

"Martini? Sweet or dry?"

"Sweet, please."

Magnus mixed a couple of them. He slid open a drawer of the sideboard. It was full of cigar boxes. He proffered one.

"No, thanks," said Cliff.

Magnus helped himself to another long thin cigar, lit it, drew on it, and sank back into one of the armchairs, glass in hand.

"Ah!" he said. "This is the life!"

Cliff settled in the other chair. "I didn't realize you appreciated the simple pleasures so much."

"My friend," said Magnus, gravely, "one only really appreciates them after months of deprivation—out there in the cold, lonely, tough places. Smoking is strictly prohibited in spaceships, in Lunar Bases, in Martian settlements, in undersea domes—because of the scarcity of air and the need to keep it pure. That ban is probably the greatest curse of my profession! I have to chew stupid gum instead—a miserable substitute. Out there on the job you have to keep a cool, clear head all the time. The rosy haze of gin and vermouth might cost you the success of your mission, maybe your life, maybe the lives of others. And music! How I love music! But there's nothing out there but radio reports, or cosmic noise, or—under the sea—the

groaning and piping of innumerable fish! Luckily, I carry a good deal of music in my head. Luckily, too, I have a good voice—when I have the chance to exercise it, that is. Some people don't appreciate music, and they put me off. I'd rather not sing at all if the general atmosphere is unsympathetic. Do you like music?"

"Oh, yes," said Cliff, politely, truly, but with inward apprehension.

"Good," said Magnus, jumping up. He slipped a roll into the tape-player. Cliff was relieved. For a moment he'd feared Magnus was going to sing. Sombre orchestral chords filled the room, and then men sang with lyrical sweetness.

"Tosca," sighed Magnus, and sank back dreamily in his chair, eyes closed.

A couple of hours or so later, Tosca having at last jumped to her death with a vengeful shriek, and the Martini glasses having been refilled half a dozen times, Magnus showed a slightly muzzy but happy Cliff over the small house, including the rather bare but neat guest bedroom.

"It rather surprises me," commented Cliff. "I expected to find the place a sort of museum—you know, chunks of lunar rock under glass, stuffed deep-sea fish, meteorites, rare Martian plants in pots, possibly genuine Martian sculptures, photos of spaceships, the Andromeda nebula, and sunrise over the Straight Wall—that sort of thing."

"That sort of thing," said Magnus, deliberately, "belongs anywhere but here. This is my home. Here I want to feel safe from that sort of thing. I don't even want to be reminded that it exists."

"If you hate that life, why ever did you go in for it?"

"You're the hundredth person who's asked that, and the answer isn't simple. I'll tell you some other time—maybe. Let's eat now. I always eat out here—I'm a wretched

cook."

So they went out into Sycamore Lane again. It was quieter now. Most of the stalls were beginning to close down. But still the pair kept bumping into Magnus's friends. It was "Hiya, Joe" and "Hello, Sourpuss" and "Well met, Matty!" every few yards. And at the café Magnus seemed to know not only the proprietor intimately, but also all the other diners.

The talk, thick with chaff and banter, was mostly about persons, families, children. Outer space was a back number and the decapods might never have existed. There were a few cracks about Magnus's bosses at the S.I.D., and that was all.

Cliff liked these people, and they seemed willing to count him as one of themselves. But he knew that he could never be more than a genial outsider. This was not his world. But it was very obviously Magnus's world. What a strange, contradictory, complex fellow the man was!

After the meal of steak and onions washed down with great thick mugs of strong tea, there began a round of visiting, which later took in the public bars of public houses without number. These taverns somehow seemed always to stand on the corner of a street which looked just like every other street.

Cliff's impression of this tour remained afterwards no more than a confused memory of friendly faces drifting through air blue with tobacco smoke, of pint tankards appearing constantly under his nose, always foamingly full however hard be tried to empty them, of much back-slapping and laughing, of the singing of roaring choruses, with Magnus's unmelodious voice somehow failing to keep in tune even with their simple refrains. As the evening passed, such a glow began to enfold him that he could listen to Magnus singing and yet continue to smile, if

foolishly.

Then at last he and Magnus were alone, walking none too steadily through empty streets under the radiance of the tall lamp-standards.

Once Magnus paused to point up at the glow of light above them. “Can you see the sky, Cliff?”

Cliff peered up. “No.”

“Good,” said Magnus, and walked on.

Presently, somehow, they were back in the little house, back in the comfortable rear room. Magnus looked through the window at the small courtyard, bright-lit from the lamp-standard which shone its beams over the walls.

“Can you see the sky from here, Cliff?” he demanded.

Cliff looked. “No.”

“Good,” said Magnus, and pulled the heavy curtains together with a jingle of sliding rings. “Would you like a drink?”

“No, thanks,” said Cliff, shuddering slightly.

“Neither would I,” said Magnus, after some thought. He extracted another cigar from the sideboard and lit it.

Cliff was glad to sit down. He wished the room wouldn’t keep tilting about. Magnus sank with a sigh into the opposite chair.

“Leave!” he exclaimed. “Wonderful! I’ve waited years for it—or so it seems. Do you like my friends?”

“A great bunch,” said Cliff, and meant it.

“That’s right. They always have been. That’s why I shall always live here—even when I have Doran’s job. To me it’s a romantic place. I remember I used to think the Lake District a romantic place, until I spent one leave there. Never again! It’s still one of the loneliest areas in Britain—I might have been by one of the remote Martian canals. There were no lights at night to hide the stars. They shone from above, they shone from below—reflected in the

lakes. It was like being back in outer space. No—give me Bermondsey!"

He began telling something of the history of Bermondsey. It was, he said, a close, solid community through the centuries, whose brotherhood was never stronger than during the blitzes of the Second World War, when whole streets of these little houses were wiped out, and when once no less than three-quarters of the area's population had temporarily to be evacuated. The brotherhood was still a living thing: the dockers stuck by each other in time of trouble.

"You don't get enough of that sort of thing in the S.I.D.," said Magnus. "Perhaps it's because S.I.D. men are too few, too scattered, and are forced to be lone wolves. It suits some temperaments, but not mine. I like to work with people—at least, my sort of people, which doesn't include officials."

Cliff said: "I take it you were born in this district?"

"Yes. But I was an orphan, I had no real home. I hadn't even any relatives. But people who'd known my parents cared for me. I said I had no home. Actually, I had many—I was moved from this house to that, but always within the district, as and when people could afford the room and the money to keep me. They were trying to save me from a State Home. But once the State did get me. I was in a State Home for two months. They looked after you there—but only physically. Instead of love they gave you orders. I guess that's the root of my dislike for officialdom. I ran away. They never got me back. The people of Bermondsey kept me hidden and safe. They have no liking for the law around this way. In dock areas, you know, crates and barrels are apt to vanish mysteriously from the wharves—sometimes." Magnus laughed. "I wonder what percentage of the goods we saw in the market today came legitimately

from the wholesalers? I shouldn't rate it too high. But Bermondsey people are strictly honest with each other, always, which is more than you can say for the gentlemen at the other end of London Bridge."

"Why do you hate to see the stars?" asked Cliff, out of the blue.

Magnus sobered, and reflected. Presently he said: "I'll tell you something I've never told another soul. The sight of the stars scares me green. This solar system itself is a pretty bleak place, but it's like a cosy family circle compared with what's outside. Beyond Pluto lies twenty-five million million miles of utter nothingness to the very nearest star. And we still don't know whether that star has any planets. Imagine going all that way only to find that you yourself were the only life for endless millions of miles around! The desolation of it! Beyond, between the stars, the gulfs stretch wider and wider—even to try to visualize them makes the imagination feel it must crack. I tell you, it frightens me."

"But you don't have to worry about it. We shan't reach the stars in our lifetime."

"We shall, Cliff. I know more than you about these things. For years in Vienna they've been working on an ion rocket. They're getting the hang of the thing at last. Within ten or fifteen years it'll be a fact. Then—look out, stars, here we come! And who's going to be in the vanguard? The best spacemen the Bureau can supply. You can bet your bottom dollar that among them will be yours truly, Martin Magnus. My trouble is that I'm too good at my job."

"But you may be sitting in Doran's safe seat by then."

"That," said Magnus, "is the one straw of hope I clutch at."

"But think of the adventure of interstellar travel! The

new worlds to be opened up, the new forms of life and intelligence one may encounter!"

"Darn new worlds—the old one's good enough for me," said Magnus. "I'll warrant that nowhere within a billion light-years is there any place to compare with Earth for beauty and comfort. Think of being exiled from it, not for a matter of months or even a couple of years, but for tens of years—for that's what interstellar travel will mean. Think of having a leave only once every twenty years! Twenty years in the void, eating my heart out for Sycamore Lane! Now do you understand why I try to shut the night sky out of this, my world?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But I still don't see why you ever became an S.I.D. man."

"That's not so easy to explain. Let's put it this way. I love life. I love people. But they will starve to death on this planet if nothing is done. Food and living space for them must be found. Do you think I could just sit here and watch my friends starve, after all they did for me? They made sacrifices for me. I must do as much for them. I resolved that I must use my ability to the utmost to preserve life. So I joined the Scientific Bureau. They thought—and rightly—I could serve the Bureau best in the S.I.D. I shall probably be beefing for the rest of my life, but I know darn well there's no other path for me."

Cliff laughed. "You really are a strange character."

"So people tell me. But, you see, anywhere outside of Bermondsey I'm always out of my element. I feel insecure, lonely, and scared. So to hide it, I have to act tough."

"But you're not tough really?"

"Of course not."

Cliff laughed again, loudly. "That's rich," he said. "Oh, dear. I don't feel very well. I'd better get to bed."

He got up, rather shakily.

"You'll feel better in the morning," said Magnus, solicitously. "And you can have a nice long lie in bed."

Magnus was wrong on both counts. He himself awakened Cliff around seven a.m. by shaking him firmly by the shoulders.

"Gosh, my head!" groaned Cliff, sitting up and clasping his forehead, which seemed to be opening and closing like a bellows. Somewhere an electric bell kept ringing: the sound stabbed at his brain like a red-hot wire.

"Listen," whispered Magnus, urgently. "There's a Bureau car outside. Doran's stand-in, Krasnowitcz, is in it —I saw him from my window. He didn't see me. It must be something important, or Doran wouldn't have sent Krasnowitcz. Go and tell him I took a train last night to Scotland. Got it?"

"But they may have come for me—I'm to start for Malacante today."

"Not this early. And they wouldn't have sent Krasnowitcz. They want to rush me away on some new mission. I might have known Doran would break his promise. Come on, old chap, do me this favour."

"Okay." Cliff crawled out of bed and into his dressing-gown. He went down and opened the front door. A uniformed driver stood there.

"Mr Magnus?"

"No," said Cliff. "He's gone to Scotland."

"What's that?" This was a bass voice speaking from the shiny grey Bureau car. Krasnowitcz had put his head out of the window. He was a handsome man in his fifties, and looked as distinguished as the headmaster of a public school.

"Mr Magnus went to Scotland last night," said Cliff, loudly.

Krasnowitcz looked worried. "Did he leave any

address?"

"No."

Krasnowitcz thought for a moment, then said: "May I ask who you are, sir?"

"My name is Page—Clifford Page."

"Then," said Krasnowitcz, "it's you I wish to see. The Bureau said you were staying at an hotel, but they didn't know which. But they thought Magnus might know."

Magnus appeared suddenly behind Cliff. "So you don't want me, after all, Krasnowitcz?"

Krasnowitcz's eyebrows lifted. He looked pained in a distinguished way.

"I thought you were in Scotland?"

"I just got back—came in the back way," said Magnus, solemnly.

"I see. Well, Mr Page, Mr Doran sent me personally to convey some news which, I'm afraid, isn't very happy. Your brother, Kenneth, disappeared early this morning. I'm very sorry."

"Disappeared?" echoed Cliff. Dismay swept him like a cold wind.

"Yes. That doesn't mean that he may not still be alive, of course. He had enough oxygen in his cylinders to last for several hours. It seems that he went out to patrol the undersea plantation at Malacante, as he's been doing regularly, but failed to return at the usual time. The overseer put on his diving-suit and went out to look for him. He found nothing except—"

Krasnowitcz paused, then went on gravely: "Except the fish-spear your brother had been carrying. It was lying on the sea-bottom. And it was covered with a thin slime."

7

MYSTERY AT MALACANTE

"THE Venusians," said Martin Magnus, quietly.

"It would seem so," said Krasnowitcz. "Now, Mr Doran thinks there's still a chance of rescue if we can rush the decapod out to Malacante right away. In fact, it's now on the way to the airport—there's a 'plane waiting. But we can't convey to it what's happened, and what we want of it. We don't know the sign language. We hoped you, Mr Page, knew enough to make it understand. Mr Doran sent me to collect you, so that you can fly to Malacante with it."

"But," said Cliff, distractedly, "I know hardly anything of the sign language!"

Magnus patted his shoulder. "Don't worry, son. I'm coming with you."

"But, Magnus—your leave!"

"Confound my leave! You thought I was worth searching for when all the others had given me up for dead. I don't forget things like that. This time I'll be glad to help you search. Let's get dressed—and quick."

As Cliff flung on his clothes, his mind was a turmoil. He kept worrying over Ken's fate. It was a reassurance to have Magnus on the job. But time was terribly short, and they didn't even know yet the nature of the thing they had to fight. Not easing this mental conflict was a lurking guilty feeling because he had not really gone searching for Magnus, but for decapods—and small ones at that. But he

hadn't the courage to own up to it.

In a few minutes he was bundling into the car with Magnus, crowding Krasnowitcz into the offside corner. The gleaming new car rushed off as if it were anxious not to be seen in Bermondsey, where obviously it didn't belong. It sped back across the river, towards the airport.

When they got there, the decapod was already in the 'plane. They joined it. In his haste Cliff had forgotten to bring even a toothbrush, let alone his shaving tackle. The more experienced traveller, Magnus, however, had brought a case of toilet accessories, and a couple of other things besides: his peculiar rifle, which he'd rescued from the lunar cavern before returning to Earth; and his wire spray.

He used the latter now to converse with the somewhat cramped decapod as the 'plane jetted south-west towards the Spanish coast.

Cliff watched but gathered little of the sense of the exchange.

As they had discovered, if the decapod concentrated its attention on only one person, only that person received its thoughts. But it could if it wished spread its attention diffusely over a whole bunch of people, and they would all receive at least the general import of its thoughts. This time the decapod reserved what it had to say for Magnus alone. Cliff had the impression that so far from being impolite, it was trying in its fashion to be considerate: the subject under discussion was Ken's unfortunate fate, and the decapod didn't want to keep reminding Cliff of it.

But presently Magnus told him: "Maybe we kid the decapods a bit, but by heaven we're going to be glad to have them along with us on Earth! They're the sort of creatures who'll do anything to help. The leader here is going to do his darnedest to locate Ken. I've warned him of the danger, that the Venusians seem to have powers we

don't understand. But he's not worried. He says if it comes to a trial of strength, he thinks he'll be able to hold his own."

"Yes, but he's only one," said Cliff. "They may be many."

"Yes, they may. But we don't know."

Quite soon, the 'plane began to drop from the stratosphere, then cut its way like a blade through a heap of cumulus cloud, and glided down towards the Spanish coastline. The airport seemed to swim up through a slight heat-mist. Waiting on the edge of it was a solitary truck.

"That's for us, you bet," said Magnus. "Trust Doran to have everything organized."

The truck was for them, and rushed them at once to the little fishing village of Malacante. A small submarine lay there alongside the solitary jetty, up and down which a couple of men were pacing. The truck rolled on to the jetty, and stopped. The two men hurried towards it. They reported to Magnus: "We're Jarvis and Henry, sir, detailed to take you down to the dome right away."

"Don't 'sir' me, please," said Magnus, automatically, chewing his cigar. "There's another member of our party in the back of the truck."

"Is he coming with us to the dome?"

"Yes," said Magnus. "But not in the submarine."

Both men gaped at him. "He'll be swimming behind us," Magnus explained. But the explanation only befogged them the more.

Cliff trotted to the back of the truck and helped the decapod to alight. The two men's eyes grew rounder and rounder as they watched, but they said nothing.

Magnus did some rapid signalling with his wire spray, and then the decapod teetered slowly to the edge of the jetty, slipped into the water and disappeared. The much

greater gravity of Earth made movement laborious for it, but its legs were enormously strong, and it could perform far better than a man whose weight had increased sixfold.

"I warned him to keep well away from the screw," said Magnus. He tossed his cigar into the water. It fizzed briefly, then floated away, shredding. Magnus regarded it a moment. Then: "Let's go," he said, abruptly.

Jarvis and Henry, politely and tentatively, started to offer instructions about the method of entering the submarine without bumping oneself, but soon dropped them when they realized that the two men knew their way around undersea craft.

The submarine nosed down into the blue water.

Off this part of northern Spain the Continental Shelf was only about four miles wide. Then began the long slope down towards the Abyss, the real floor of the ocean. For some miles the slope was not particularly steep, but suddenly, around a depth of four hundred fathoms, it took a plunge. That place was referred to as "the edge." It was certainly the farthest edge of the great bed of EP-40 plants which stretched to it from the shore.

The slope was too steep beyond that edge to allow of planting and gathering the EPs.

The submarine, which Jarvis and Henry were handling expertly, regained an even keel and travelled only a few feet above the level of the flat Continental Shelf. An argus-eyed exterior-mounted TV camera generously filled four screens—labelled respectively "Fore," "Aft," "Port," and "Starboard"—with coloured moving pictures of the surroundings: the clear blue water, the thick green carpet of EPs spreading in every direction beneath them, and the occasional flash of a silvery fish. The "Aft" screen showed the water agitated by the screw, distorting the view of the decapod as it swam some twenty yards astern.

For four miles these views remained practically unchanged. Then the Shelf ended and the sea-bottom began to slope downwards, fairly gently. The EP-40 plants grew as thickly as ever: it was like travelling down a grassy hill. But it began to get darker. The blue outside deepened steadily until it was cobalt. It wasn't easy to see the decapod now, though it was maintaining its distance behind them. Around three hundred fathoms the cobalt should have deepened towards black, but it didn't. The ultra-violet lamps on the sea-bottom were taking the place of the vanishing daylight, and the EP plants flourished cheerfully in their radiance.

Presently on the "Fore" screen something like a blob of quicksilver appeared and, as they watched, it grew until it filled the screen: it was a gleaming dome, like the top of a metallic mushroom. It seemed merely to lie among the EP plants as though it had been dropped there. But in fact it was anchored firmly to a great spreading concrete block, invisible under the mud.

In the boss on top of it was set another four-eyed TV camera. Presumably the inmates of the dome could see the submarine as clearly as the dome could be seen.

Beyond the dome was a stubby lattice-work mast bearing a white globe.

"That's new," said Magnus, indicating it. "What is it?"

"It's a floodlight Mr Page had rigged up," said Henry. "It's to be used if the ultra-violets are smashed again. Just by it you can see the small battery-powered searchlight they used before that. They left it there as a stand-by in case the floodlight fails."

"Well, whatever happens," Magnus observed, "at least we should be able to see it."

They were, ever more slowly, nearing the dome. A circular indent became discernible in its side. Gently, the

submarine thrust its nose into it. The screw continued for a few revolutions, driving the nose in to make the fit a tight one. Then it slowed and stopped.

There was the clatter of magnetic clamps against the hull, gripping the submarine fast to the dome.

Then a section of the submarine's nose, extending back five feet from its tip, began to revolve. It was being unscrewed by machinery in the dome. It took some time, as the thread was fine. Then it was drawn swiftly into the dome by some unseen mechanism, leaving in its wake a smooth open tube a yard in diameter.

At the far end of the tube appeared the serious but welcoming face of the plantation overseer, Quintero. He was paler than most Spaniards, for he had spent much of his working life beneath the sea.

"Come, señors," he said, "we are very glad to see you."

He spoke English very nearly perfectly.

Magnus let Cliff crawl through first into the dome, then followed him. Jarvis and Henry came behind them. Cliff shook hands with Quintero and asked him, though with little hope: "Is there any further news of my brother?"

"I am sorry, but no, señor. I have been out again with three of my men, but we could discover nothing more."

"Let me see the fish-spear," said Magnus, tersely.

Quintero bowed slightly, and fetched it. He'd wrapped it carefully in a thin rubber sheet. Magnus inspected it closely under the light. Presently, he raised his eyes and found Cliff watching him anxiously.

Magnus nodded. "This slime looks to me pretty much the same stuff that was on the Venusian thought-rod. I could be wrong—I didn't have the chance to examine the rod thoroughly. But I don't think I am."

"What's our next move?" asked Cliff.

"Our next move is already in process. If there were

anything to be found in the immediate neighbourhood, no doubt Señor Quintero and his men would have come across it. There's no point at the moment in going out for a further scout around: we could scarcely hope to do better. But the decapod, maybe, can do better. It can see well beyond the point where the lamps cease to help us. Likewise, it can move twenty times faster than we, in diving-suits, could get through the water. It can reach depths where the pressure would render us helpless. It's scouting for us now. All we can do is watch for its return."

They moved farther into the dome. It was bigger than it had seemed from outside. There were bunks for all the half-dozen men present, a well-equipped laboratory, a dark-room, and an office. There was a big store of diving-gear and a sizeable library of both technical books and novels. Also, there was a panel displaying the familiar group of four TV screens, but this time they were labelled "North," "South," "East," and "West." The bottom portion of the "East" one was occupied by the narrowing perspective of the submarine.

The other screens showed only the great surround of EP-40 plants under the geometrically placed lamps. It fluctuated gently in the sea currents. A few fish swam idly around, but no shoals were to be seen. The decapod was not visible either.

Jarvis asked: "Do you want me and Henry to stand by, sir—I mean, Mr Magnus?"

"Yes. We may have to use the sub.," said Magnus, peeling the wrapper from a stick of gum, the first he'd touched since the *Goddard*. "And don't 'Mister' me—I dislike it intensely. The name's Magnus."

"Very good," said Jarvis, expressionlessly.

Quintero produced a flask of red wine, and most of the company drank a little. As Cliff sipped his, Quintero told

him how popular Kenneth had been with them all at the dome and how upset they were at his disappearance today. Cliff listened, nodding politely now and then, but never taking his gaze from the TV screens. He ached for the sight of the decapod returning, for he felt he would scream if he didn't soon learn something definite about Ken. It was the not knowing that was agony.

What had happened out there this morning? What was happening out there now—beyond the border of the green plants? Had Ken been dragged away into depths where the inexorable water pressure had crushed his metal suit as though it were but a paper bag? Or was he lying injured and helpless somewhere in the dark, with—it could scarcely be more now—but an hour's oxygen left?

The Visi flashed, and there was the face of the ubiquitous Doran, peering into the dome from far-off Trafalgar Square. He was only making a routine check. He bandied a few words with Magnus, spoke kindly to Cliff, and then his attention was whisked away to some other corner of the solar system.

The minutes ticked away. Cliff had some more wine—he felt like it.

Then suddenly Quintero exclaimed hoarsely: "Look! It's happening again!"

Everyone stared intently at the TV screens. The exact pattern of ultra-violet lamps was losing its regularity. The cable network was being pulled out of shape. The lamps were moving slowly down the slope, towards the Abyss, bobbing as they went.

"Switch on the floodlight, señor," said Magnus, a jump ahead of the inevitable.

As Quintero did so, the cables outside began to snap. All the lamps went out at once, and for a second or two the water was alive with electricity before the fuses blew.

Then the miniature sun on its mast burst into life, and the sea-bottom was lit even brighter than before. The now dull, dead shapes of the lamps were still sliding past on their cables, which rattled against the sides of the dome and tore up whole stretches of the EP plants.

Then, suddenly, they stopped moving and the tangle of them drooped over the badly ruffled plantation like a great broken spider-web.

In the dome everyone remained just as motionless, awaiting on tenterhooks the next development—if any.

When it came, it was almost upon them before anyone perceived it.

Wide patches of the EP plants visible on the screen tagged "West" had been flattened by the dragging cables. But now some of the patches which had escaped were being forced mysteriously to share their fate. It was as if some fierce concentrated undersea current were pouring towards the dome and levelling the plants as a hurricane flattens corn. Yet the sea looked as still and as clear as ever.

But there was a subtle difference in appearance between the former flat patches and the ones now appearing. The newly crushed plants glistened under the floodlight. Cliff drew Magnus's attention to it.

Magnus said at once: "They're being covered with slime. There's a film of slime creeping towards us."

Quintero gave a little yelp and reached for a button on a control panel. Cliff caught his wrist and held it. "Don't use the vibrator beam—my brother may still be out there, and the decapod too—"

"No, señor," said Quintero, swiftly. "This controls the cameras your brother set up all around this area."

"Sorry—fire away," said Cliff, and Quintero pressed the button. He was only just in time. The tide of slime

reached the floodlight's mast and seemed to run up the lattice-work incredibly quickly.

Then the mast was plucked out by its roots, bore its bright globe bravely for a few moments, lighting nothing but the empty sea and the faintly glistening coat of slime—and then was blotted out. Abruptly, stygian darkness fell outside.

"It—they—don't seem to like the light," said Cliff.

He found it difficult to refer to "the Venusians" when they weren't visible and perhaps didn't exist. All that obviously did exist was a giant's strength, wielded inexplicably through a mobile and viscous stuff that appeared to lack the cohesion necessary even to snap a matchstick.

"I've an idea they don't like us either," Magnus muttered. He stared gloomily at the four black TV screens.

"I'd better call Doran," he said. He took a pace towards the Visi, and then halted, for the whole dome swayed slightly.

"*Santa Maria!*" breathed Quintero. "What was that?"

Again everyone became motionless, poised as it were on a knife-edge, listening. Listening and waiting, dreading a repetition of the impossible thing which had just happened. For the dome was anchored in tons of concrete, and until now it had never moved a fraction of an inch out of place. It should take nothing less than a submarine earthquake to effect that. More than once giant squid had battered themselves unavailingly against it.

Yet now something—unseen, unknown—had rocked it.

Magnus nudged Cliff and indicated the steel ceiling. Arched though it was to stand up against the sea pressure of some eighty atmospheres, two indentations were appearing in it, bulging into the room, at opposite sides of the dome where the ceiling began to merge into the walls.

As yet they were slight but distinct, like the pressure marks of a finger and thumb of a great hand... or the talon of a great bird of prey.

As they bulged slowly larger, the dome swayed again, and one of the staff cried out throatily in alarm. Quintero's pale face went even paler, and he crossed himself. He wasn't the only one to do so.

Magnus spun on his heel. "Help me, Cliff." He began hauling at the wheels of the heavy mechanism which screwed the submarine's nose back in place. Cliff assisted him to wind the thread. Magnus said under his breath: "The clamps aren't strong enough to withstand *that*. If the thing pulls the sub. away, the sea will squirt in and smash us all to pulp."

Cliff nodded. He couldn't speak. His throat was dry. He was trembling with agitation. He kept glancing back over his shoulder at the indentations. They seemed now almost as big as footballs—but that might have been his heated imagination. The steel was malleable under great pressure, but it couldn't give much more: soon it must split. And then the sea would rush upon them from that way.

The dome rocked crazily. He and Magnus had to cling to the machine to keep on their feet.

"This is it," Cliff thought. "We're being torn loose."

The shaking seemed to go on for an age. Then, all at once, it ended. The menace had failed to prise the dome away from its foundations.

At least—at the first attempt.

The inmates cowered in their little bubble more than a thousand feet beneath the sea, surrounded by cold darkness and a fearsome anonymous hostility, and awaited their fate.

Magnus didn't wait long. He got Doran on the Visi, hissing between his teeth with relief when he found that that cable, anyway, was still intact.

He outlined the situation graphically. During those few minutes nothing more was felt from the power outside.

Doran listened without question till the end. Then he asked: “What about the old searchlight—will that still work ?”

Magnus snapped his fingers. “Darn it—I forgot that. But it’ll be a miracle if it does.”

However, the miracle happened. The searchlight not only still worked, but was fully under remote control from the dome. They directed it this way and that. Powerful as it was, its beam dissolved away in the dark water at a distance of only fifty yards or so. But it was a relief to be able to see again even that far.

Nothing moved in the sea around them. The patches of slime no longer spread, and seemed to have less body than before.

On the “East” screen they were glad to see the hull of the submarine, still there, apparently untouched.

Magnus scratched his head. “The whole thing beats me.”

They watched the screens for a minute in silence. Then Cliff said quietly: “I think there’s something moving on the ‘West’ screen. About fifty yards off, at the edge of the light.”

Magnus looked. “Yes, you’re right. It’s the decapod.”

The decapod swam steadily towards them along the beam, its long limbs moving gracefully and rhythmically in their natural element.

Cliff watched it, his heart quickening its beat. Had it found Ken?

Quintero studied the screen in wonder.

“Señors,” he said, “I thought you brought but one of the creatures with you?”

Even as he spoke, Magnus and Cliff also noticed the

second decapod swimming from the darkness, following the first.

"We did, Señor Quintero," said Magnus, "but it seems he's found a friend. And for the life of me I can't tell them apart. Can you, Cliff?"

Cliff shook his head. "Not at the moment... I wonder where *they* were during the attack?" A suspicion had half formed in his mind which he didn't want to recognize. But when the leading decapod swam straight up to the searchlight, wrapped its limbs around it and started to drag it away from its mounting, then that suspicion sprang into completeness.

"We've been tricked!" he exclaimed. "The decapods *are* at the bottom of it! They've joined up against us now. We shouldn't have trusted—"

"Quiet, Cliff!" Magnus interrupted, frowning.

Quintero began: "Can I turn the vibrator beam on—"

"*No!*" roared Magnus, rounding on him. "Everybody will keep still—and quiet."

Such was the impact of his authority that the assembly at once became a living tableau.

The decapod went on breaking the searchlight away from its mounting. The light continued to shine, for the unit was self-contained and battery-powered, The other decapod settled gently to the sea-bottom and remained there almost motionless. It seemed to be waiting.

Then vague thoughts that were not his own began to creep into Cliff's mind. The trend of them was "Follow us" or "Come with us."

He and Magnus had learned that when the decapod could see them clearly it could direct its thoughts to them clearly. But when they were hidden from it, as now, its telepathic power seemed to spread wider but weaker, lacking concentration. There was no obvious reason for

this, but it was so. Probably everyone in the dome was receiving these thought impressions simultaneously, but no more explicitly than he was.

But they were sufficiently clear for Magnus. "Jarvis, open the submarine lock, will you? Give him a hand, Henry."

The two men set about the task.

"We're going to follow them in the sub?" asked Cliff.

"Yes. The decapods are still on our side, Cliff. If you knew them as I do, you'd never have doubted them."

Cliff was abashed, and said no more. He watched the screw thread rapidly unwinding. Then the way into the submarine was open again. Jarvis and Henry went through. He started to follow them as Magnus addressed Quintero: "Señor, you'll keep in touch with us by radio. If we get out of range, switch to sonar."

"Yes, Señor Magnus."

Radio was effective only at short range under water. The sonar covered a longer distance, sending sound waves through the water by means of an electrically vibrated diaphragm, but in some circumstances echoes made its use an exasperating business. Radio was preferable where possible.

Magnus made to follow Cliff, then paused to give Quintero some final instructions. "We'll be borrowing the searchlight. I hope we can return it soon. Meantime, call Doran, tell him what we're doing—and ask him to rush a bunch of shrimp electrical engineers out here to fix the ultra-violets."

"Very good, señor."

Quintero was still much too pale. Magnus looked at him, and then at the rest of the staff, who were mainly inoffensive plant-tenders. Plainly, they were all unhappy about being left here in the dome with complete darkness

around them and the unseen terror still out there somewhere.

"Cheer up," said Magnus, with a smile. "Tell Doran I recommend this dome be evacuated until we've laid the ghost."

They all brightened up at that, even though some of the Spaniards didn't quite understand the colloquialism. "Oh—one other thing," Magnus added. "Collect the plates from all those cameras. Develop 'em at once and let me know if they tell us anything."

The cheerfulness evaporated again. No one relished going out there, with but a diving-suit for protection.

Quintero set his mouth. "I'll get them myself."

"Good man," said Magnus, flicked a farewell salute, and joined the others in the submarine. The nose was screwed on again, and the craft backed slowly away from the dome. On one of its TV screens the occupants could see the searchlight seemingly moving by itself through the black water. But occasionally two or three long spidery legs flickered across the beam: the light was being carried.

"Just follow the light," Magnus told Jarvis. "Not too close."

Henry was at the radio, talking to the dome set.

Magnus regarded Cliff's strained face for a moment in silence. Then he said, kindly: "They're taking us to see something—that's obvious. Perhaps they've found Ken."

"Maybe," said Cliff, who'd been nursing that hope. "But if they have, why didn't they bring him back?"

"I don't know—he may have fallen in a cleft where they can't reach him."

"If *they* can't," said Cliff, despondently, "then how can we?"

"Don't worry, son. Let's cross that bridge if and when we come to it."

The submarine began to sink. “They’re going down,” Jarvis reported, and Magnus nodded an acknowledgement.

The decapods had crossed the far border of the plantation and were slanting downwards, keeping parallel with the steeper slope which led to the Abyss. The searchlight no longer illumined a carpet of broad green leaves but only ooze and rocks. It was little enough to see, but Cliff never took his eyes from the screen. Wherever Ken was, if he were still alive he must now be in desperate straits for want of oxygen. Every second counted.

But another two hundred precious seconds ticked away before anything but ooze and rocks became visible. And then it was something entirely unexpected.

It was a shape reminiscent of one of Magnus’s cigars—very long and thin. But it was a deal bigger than their submarine.

It lay motionless on the slope. Its colour was greyish. From its dull gleam it appeared to be metal, but it was wrought all of a piece: neither plates nor riveting were discernible. It was pointed sharply at both ends. No orifice was apparent anywhere, except a small circular window set in what was possibly the front end of a conning tower so flat and squat that it was little more than a blister. The window—if it were such—was not lit. It was glazed and dull, like a single dead eye.

Cliff was puzzled by the appearance of the thing. Magnus confided to Jarvis: “I’ve been out in space a long time. I’m out of touch with the new sub. designs. What class is this?”

Jarvis shook his head. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen one like it.”

One decapod carried the searchlight slowly up and down so that the mysterious craft could be seen in more detail, But that helped little, for the craft was almost

featureless.

The other decapod could be seen only intermittently as the beam touched it. It had settled on a neighbouring rock.

"It's trying to contact us," said Magnus, suddenly.

Cliff endeavoured to open his mind to the thoughts.

At first they were blurred. Something like "Diver inside" or "Metal-man in here." Then they crystallized into "Brother is inside this."

Cliff exclaimed aloud. The decapod had fulfilled its mission. Somehow it had located Ken. He concentrated hard, trying to catch more information. But the thoughts faded, lost coherence and meaning. He couldn't grasp them. Then just one word came through like the stab of a stiletto: "Venusian."

Magnus got it too. "Venusian!" he repeated. "So the Venusians already have submarines in our oceans. How long's this been going on, I wonder? Doran will throw a fit when he hears about it. Are we still through by radio, Henry? Right—give me the headphones."

He put them on and snatched the microphone. "Hello, dome. Relay this message to Doran right away. Rush salvage ship from Corunna to point eight miles due west of Malacante—I'll give you the position more exactly when we've worked it out. Emergency job—to grapple and raise unknown submarine lying around four hundred and forty fathoms at this point. Make all possible speed—it's a matter of life and death. Got that? Okay."

He passed the signalling gear back to Henry, saying: "That's all we can do at the moment, Cliff. If we had diving-suits we could go out and poke around that thing, but from here I don't see any way in. Not an opening. Let's cruise round the other side—maybe we'll spot something there."

He motioned to Jarvis, and the submarine passed

slowly across the bows of the other craft. The decapod with the light caught on at once and swam round too, illuminating the other side. But both sides of the strange ship were alike.

They were just passing back over what they presumed to be its stern when the thing slid slowly from beneath them, rising as it went, heading up the slope. Yet they felt no backwash.

"Follow it—quick!" Magnus snapped to Jarvis. Their craft swung to pursue the other. They kept its image centred in the "Fore" TV screen. But the image was dwindling fast into the darkness.

"Top speed—blow all tanks," urged Magnus.

They left the decapods and their light behind. The submarine charged up blindly through the dark waters.

"Keep her dead ahead—it's the best we can do," said Magnus.

Cliff stared anxiously at the four blank, black screens. Were the Venusians trying to escape from them, taking Ken with them, or were they just surfacing for a parley?

A deep shade of blue crept into the screens, and became lighter and lighter. They were in the region of daylight again.

"There she is!" exclaimed Magnus, pointing at the "Fore" screen. "We're on the right line, but gosh!—she's gained a hundred fathoms on us."

The other ship was little more than a dot in the centre of the screen, black against the light.

"She's still going up," murmured Jarvis. "She'll break surface any time now."

They watched, and all at once the black dot completely vanished. Cliff's heart shrank with the disappointment of this new surprise. If the Venusians could render not only themselves invisible, but also their ship, the chances of

rescuing Ken were practically non-existent.

The submarine rose dangerously swiftly, ignoring regulation speeds. Then suddenly it surfaced, its bows rising high, then falling with a sickening, splashing impact. Almost before the lumpy fountains had subsided, Magnus had the conning-tower hatch open and was climbing outside. Cliff followed at his heels.

There was a thin drizzle falling. The cumulus clouds had thickened into grey rainclouds which were spread over half the sky, though to the west the sun still shone on the sea-horizon—a line of bright silver. Along the eastern horizon lay the slightly misty line of the Spanish coast. But in all the miles which lay between those two lines their submarine was the only object upon the face of the waters. The Venusian ship had vanished like a dream.

Magnus mixed shrimp and starbug oaths impartially.

"The Venusians," he added, bitterly, "are as slippery as their slime."

Cliff stood beside him on the tower, feeling about as miserable as he'd ever felt in his life. His hopes had been raised—and then very thoroughly dashed.

A decapod surfaced quietly a few yards away, then pulled itself on to the deck just below them. Now that he could see its slight individual markings clearly, Cliff recognized it as the lunar decapod. Magnus leaned forward eagerly, pulling his wire spray from his pocket. But before he could adjust it, the decapod raised its foremost six limbs and pointed them, bunched, at the lowering clouds.

Now that it could see them, its thoughts came clearly. "It went straight up there—perhaps into space."

Cliff thumped his fist on the rim of the tower. "It wasn't a submarine—it was a spaceship! Or rather—both."

Magnus said: "I'm a certifiable idiot! *That* was the spaceship I saw on the radar tracker at Lunar Base One. As

I suspected afterwards, it never landed on the Moon at all. It shot round it, past it, to Earth. Went straight to the sea-bottom and stayed there. No wonder nobody's seen it all this time!"

He backed down the ladder so hastily that he fell the last few feet. Almost immediately Cliff heard him calling over the radio: "Hello, dome. Pass this message to Doran at once. Venusian spaceship taking off in area of Malacante. Now probably several miles up. Bring all available radar trackers to bear. Alert space-stations—see if they can pick it up. Alert Lunar Bases. Alert all spaceships anywhere near Earth. Try interception if remotely possible. But do not destroy—Kenneth Page is aboard this ship, believed prisoner."

Then Magnus climbed breathlessly back. The decapod had been waiting patiently. There was no sign of its companion. Magnus at once began to question it. It directed its answers at both men.

"What do you know of the Venusians?"

"Very little. I could detect only one of them—in the ship. He is highly intelligent, but quite unlike you or me. I have not seen him. No one has seen him. My companion decapod happened to pass near the Venusian ship apparently just after the Venusian had entered it as it lay on the sea-bed. The—"

Here the decapod fumbled for thoughts to describe something outside its own experience. They discovered that it meant the flat superstructure—which they'd taken for a conning tower of sorts—on the Venusian ship. This, apparently, lifted like a hinged lid. It was open when the other decapod saw it, and a man in a metal diving-suit—obviously Ken—was being drawn into it from within, by something unseen, and the lid was already closing upon him.

The watching decapod could see this only indistinctly, for the ship lay at a depth where even a decapod's super-sensitive eyes could discern little in a gloom which was utter darkness to human eyes.

"Where is your companion now?" asked Magnus.

"Taking the light back from whence we removed it."

"Thoughtful fellow," muttered Magnus. "However, there's no need for them down there to be scared any longer: the ghost has gone."

Henry called up from below: "Dome reports that Mr Doran has received your message and is acting on it."

"Good," said Magnus. "Now ask Quintero if he got those photographs."

"Right."

Cliff said: "If we couldn't see anything at all, what hope is there that the cameras saw any more?"

He was still sick with disappointment, and pessimistic about everything.

"You never know what details a camera lens might pick up," said Magnus.

Henry called up. "Señor Quintero got the photos. He's just printed them and says they only show what we saw, but from different angles, of course."

"Well, it's about time we looked at this thing from another angle," said Magnus. "I'd like to see 'em. We'll go down and collect them. Wait, though—I've an idea."

He signalled with the spray to the decapod. Cliff received the answer also: "I think I can reach him telepathically, but it may be difficult. I'll try."

Presently, more thoughts came. "Yes, he understands. He's at the dome now, just putting the light back."

Magnus acknowledged the message with a flick of the spray, and called down to Henry: "Tell Quintero to put the photos in a watertight container and pass it out through the

airlock to the friendly critter outside who's just returned the searchlight. Tell him he needn't be afraid—the dome won't be attacked again: the poltergeist has gone."

"The what?"

"The mischief-maker has gone. Oh, and another thing—tell him to phone the airport and have 'em send a truck to the jetty—pronto."

When Quintero's assent came through, Magnus told Jarvis to head the submarine back to Malacante, keeping her on the surface.

He explained to Cliff: "The other decapod will follow us to shore with the prints—I made that clear. We'll have to hustle back to the airfield and take the 'plane to London. I'll have a Visi-chat at the airfield with Doran first."

"Then what?"

"It depends where the Venusian ship's headed. If it's returning to Venus, as I suspect, then I'm going to do something I'd have bet a million dollars I'd never do: volunteer to go on the Venus expedition."

"You'd do that, for Ken and me? After all you told me in Sycamore Lane?"

"We—ell, frankly, it isn't just that alone. I've got my teeth into this crazy thing now. I've got to follow it to the end or die of curiosity."

But Cliff chose to think that that was the lesser side of it. To express his gratitude would, he knew, embarrass Magnus, and when Magnus asked inconsequentially "Have a cigar?" he took one, and muttered "Thanks." He meant that word to cover more than the cigar.

Magnus said, offering a light: "Don't worry too much about Ken, old man. I think he's been kidnapped, taken back to Venus as a specimen of Earth life—a sort of backhanded compliment to our sampling their planet. But you bet they'll want to keep their specimen alive and in

good shape. We'll catch up with them, sooner or later—you'll see. I'll try to get some more dope from our friend here."

Then Magnus, a long cigar canting from his lips, began an earnest conversation with the decapod, which still perched on the raised deck as the submarine ploughed towards the land. The drizzle was ceasing.

Cliff thought over Magnus's theory. It was plausible, even possible. But there were nagging difficulties, unanswerable questions. Did the Venusian breathe air? If so, why did it choose to make life awkward for itself by remaining at the bottom of the sea? Because, there, it was hard to find and hard to reach? If it didn't breathe air, then Ken by now must surely be dead from suffocation.

Because he was preoccupied with these surmises, Cliff noted only fragments of the long account which the decapod was giving to Magnus. It seemed that soon after the decapod had swum away to begin its search, its mind became aware telepathically of another mind not dissimilar to its own somewhere in the vicinity. It managed to contact it, and so the first meeting between lunar decapod and terrestrial decapod came about.

They were plainly from the same family and at roughly the same level of evolution. This appeared to corroborate the old theory that the Moon had once been part of Earth, and had been torn from it, leaving the great depression of the Pacific Ocean. And it had carried decapod life-seeds—if few others—with it.

So both races flourished independently on their respective planets, unaware of each other's existence. Yet they shared, too, the characteristic that as their longevity increased, so their birth-rate fell drastically. There were far more terrestrial decapods than lunar ones, but in proportion to the size of the oceans they inhabited they were still very

rare creatures.

It was not wholly because of their rarity that they had until recently escaped the notice of man. They had for centuries watched whales and seals and other sea-creatures being hunted bloodthirstily by man, and they had been most careful to keep out of the way of this dangerous land-creature who was now, to their alarm, beginning to venture farther and farther into their world.

For, like their lunar cousins, the terrestrial decapods were gentle and harmless, much given to philosophical speculation and scarcely at all to material invention.

The lunar decapod tried to persuade his opposite number that man had matured rapidly in the last fifty years and no longer killed for the sake of killing; that he was prepared to live and let live, and had already offered the lunar creatures sanctuary in Earth's oceans.

The terrestrial decapod was glad to hear of this prospective swelling of his people's ranks: the opportunities for exchanging fresh philosophical concepts were exciting—at least, to decapods. But he was still wary about man's intentions towards their kind. He had himself only ventured into this perilous area of the man-made plantation because a friend of his was last seen in this direction, and had mysteriously disappeared. He suspected man was at the bottom of it.

The lunar decapod then had the awkward task of explaining that indeed the missing decapod had been killed by man, but only quite accidentally in an attempt at defence against an attack from the Venusian. Finally, the terrestrial decapod accepted this explanation, led the other to the ship containing the offending Venusian, and even agreed to assist in leading men to it also.

Here Magnus asked how they knew the Venusian was highly intelligent.

The decapod replied: “It is difficult to explain to a man. Possibly you know that all brains of any kind emit rhythmic electrical impulses. Feeble minds emit only feeble rhythms. With more powerful but ill-organized minds the rhythms are irregular, sometimes chaotic. But a highly intelligent mind, well-balanced, emits wave patterns with a steady, strong rhythm. It is unmistakable. Both the other decapod and myself could detect that rhythm clearly, and agreed that its source was the Venusian ship.”

Cliff momentarily left his gloomy reflections to consider the decapod’s statements. A wild fancy now filled his mind. Supposing there wasn’t a Venusian in the ship at all? The Earthlings had sent a robot sampler to Venus. Suppose the Venusians were giving tit for tat—exactly? And the Venusian ship was just a robot sampler of their own particular manufacture? Their automatic mechanisms were likely to be more elaborate than the terrestrial sort. He’d heard about their thought-rod. If a small piece of material could be made to carry their thoughts, then imagine the thought-power of a ship crammed with their robot devices!

Such an assemblage of self-acting mechanisms must repeat the powerful thought-rhythms of the brains which created them. And it was *that* rhythm, at one remove, which the decapods had picked up. Perhaps.

Would he ever know?

He felt almost like bawling because of the agonizing uncertainty of everything.

The submarine ran alongside the little jetty. Magnus was looking back at the grey sea under the grey sky. He saw what he sought—the second decapod swimming in its deceptively lazy way towards them. It came up to the side of the submarine and passed its small burden to the lunar decapod, for it was still shy of direct contact with man.

The lunar decapod passed it up to Magnus, who tucked it under his arm and semaphored with the spray.

The thoughts came in answer: "Thank you, but no. I must explore this ocean world further before I return. So far as I have seen it looks very promising for my people. But I have seen so little yet. I will go with my companion and meet his kind and discuss things further. It is a big step, this migration, and I alone am responsible. Tell your Bureau that I shall return to this spot when I have decided, and wait for them. Then perhaps they will transport me back to the Moon, and if there is to be a migration, arrange it."

Magnus replied with the gesture Cliff now knew to be an affirmative.

The decapod joined its companion in the water, and together they swam out to sea, sinking slowly as they went until they were lost to view.

The truck from the airport hadn't yet arrived. While they waited for it, Magnus and Cliff sat on the jetty's edge, dangling their legs over the water, and studied the photographs. There were six of them. Each one depicted a different view of the scene on the sea-bed as the cable network was being dragged apart. In some of them the dome itself showed clearly in the background.

"There's something odd about those cables," said Magnus. "D'you spot it, Cliff?"

"Do you mean the way they seem to be pulled in *different* directions?"

"Yes. If one creature, off-stage somewhere, had grabbed a corner of the network and pulled it towards him, then naturally all the cables would be stretched in one general direction—his. But see here. That cable's obviously being pulled upwards, and that one downwards. That one towards the dome. This one away from it. Four

opposing directions. The force is being applied not so much to drag the cables away as to *break* 'em."

"I agree," said Cliff. "But it doesn't add up. The decapod said there's only one Venusian. It would take at least four of them pulling in different directions to produce that effect."

"Confusion worse confounded!" groaned Magnus, clapping a hand to his brow.

"Beckworth Bruce had a theory that the Venusians used some sort of energy beam which could exert force on material from a distance," said Cliff. "That would explain, too, the two dents which were made in the dome. Also how Ken was drawn into the Venusian ship although the cause wasn't visible."

"Maybe so," admitted Magnus, a trifle wearily. "It's a sure thing their spaceship is driven by some force we don't know about. It had no open vents—couldn't have been any type of rocket. The force acts under water too—I couldn't see that the thing had any screw, like any other submarine. If it had, we should have felt its backwash."

The airport truck came tearing towards them along the dusty white road.

They got to their feet, shook hands with Jarvis and Henry, who were remaining with their submarine, and piled into the truck. The driver obviously wondered where the decapod was, but they felt it was all too much to explain, and let him wonder.

They made record time back to the airport. While their 'plane was warming up, Magnus went into the control room and delivered his Visi report to Doran, about the decapods, about the photographs. Doran said he would make the decapods his personal responsibility from now on. As for the photos, he'd wait until he could see them himself, properly, not merely as a smudge over the Visi.

Magnus added a postscript: “I want to go with the Venus expedition, which should now start at the earliest possible moment.”

Doran said, primly: “I’m afraid that rests with Baldy Bruce, not me.”

“Oh, lord, he doesn’t approve of me.”

“Who does?” asked Doran, and switched off.

In the ’plane Magnus and Cliff had little to say to each other, for each was occupied with his own thoughts.

Then when Magnus was gazing down unseeing at the maze of Southampton’s docks, far below, he was startled by a loud exclamation from Cliff.

“Let me see those photos again!”

Magnus passed them over, and Cliff scanned them eagerly.

“I’m right,” he said, with excitement. “I’m sure I’m right.”

“Give,” said Magnus, simply.

“Look. On each photo there’s a small black circular dot. On every blessed one—see?”

“Yes, I see. Quintero printed ’em in a hurry—got specks of grit on them. Or dust.”

“Just one speck on each?”

“It’s possible, Cliff—why not?”

“Look at them closely. They’re perfectly circular. A dust speck would be ragged at the edges. They aren’t different specks—they’re different views of the one same little thing.”

“Well, what is it, then?”

“Merely the cause of all the trouble.”

Magnus sat up straight. “What do you mean—that tiny thing is the source of the force beams?”

“Force beams—phooey! The cables weren’t broken by any force beams. Oh, I’ve been so stupid! And I have the

nerve to call myself a marine biologist! I should have guessed the explanation right away—it's clear and straightforward enough."

"Not to me," said Magnus. "Explain."

Cliff did.

8

THE VENUS EXPEDITION

OLIVIA greeted them with her special smile, and asked if they'd had a nice trip.

Cliff hastened to assure her that they had. Magnus stared at her without seeing her, obviously not having heard her. He did not hate women. He merely disregarded them, even superior specimens like Olivia.

She ushered them into Doran's office. It was thick with tobacco smoke. Beckworth Bruce, engulfed in one of the big armchairs, was pumping smoke from his pipe as though it was his sole purpose in life. The poise of the dapperly dressed Doran was spoiled by attacks of coughing. Magnus regarded him, smiled, then deliberately lit one of his long cigars.

"Oh, no!" gasped Doran. "There'll have to be a law against this sort of pollution of the atmosphere."

"Better if you abolished the law about spacemen not smoking in spaceships," said Magnus. "Then we shouldn't have to work so hard catching up on our smoking back on Earth."

Doran waved him and Cliff to chairs, and spluttered to Olivia: "Krasnowitcz!"

She nodded, knowing he meant the second-in-command was to take over, and withdrew.

"Photographs!" gasped Doran, holding out his hand for them. Magnus delivered them. As Doran finished studying each, he passed it to Bruce.

When he was through, Magnus didn't wait for his comments but asked point-blank: "Any luck in tracking the Venusian ship?"

"The space-stations picked it up," said Doran. "Unluckily, we didn't have a spaceship out this side of the Moon. When it crossed the station orbit it hadn't even reached orbital velocity, although it was slowly accelerating, That means, of course, it had constant drive and didn't have to escape from Earth in one mad rush like our own ships. The stations computed its path. From the steady acceleration it was building up, they worked out that it was taking the straight route to Venus."

Bruce grunted, "Wish *Archimedes* could do the same instead of following such a darn wide elliptical orbit just to save a few tons of propellant."

"They seem to carry all the propellant they need," said Doran, "whatever form it takes. The stations could see no sign of a trail."

"Didn't imagine they would," said Magnus, "Either the Venusians understand anti-gravity, which we think is an absurd concept, or else they must get their energy somehow from the enormous magnetic field of the sun—at least, that's my theory."

Doran nodded. His gaze fell on Cliff, who was listening earnestly. "Well, young fellow,"he said, —˜we were sorry to hear about your brother. But Baldy here is going to do his darnedest to bring him back."

"May I go with him, sir?"

There was a silence. It would be hard to say which of the other three men was the most surprised, for Cliff hadn't even hinted at this wish to Magnus.

"That," said Doran, presently, "rests with Mr Bruce."

Bruce frowned, and sucked noisily at his pipe. He said: "I quite understand your desire, Page, and have every

sympathy with it. But for months now I've been getting together a crew, and it's been quite a headache. On a first-time-out mission like this one it's important that every man must have the highest qualifications and the widest experience. I've picked them by hand. Can't risk the whole expedition failing—as well it might—just because one man isn't equal to any demand, even though it's not his own fault. No, I'm sorry."

Cliff's face fell.

Martin Magnus said smoothly: "Bruce—did Doran tell you I also wished to go?"

"Yes, he did. That's another matter entirely. You're better qualified than the best man I have. I should be glad to have your services."

"My services—but not me, eh?" said Magnus, wryly.

"I never said—"

"Skip it, Baldy," said Magnus. "Now, would you recognize a Venusian if you saw one? I mean, of the kind who recently visited us?"

"How could anyone? He wasn't seen."

"Would you know just where on Venus our visitant is pretty sure to be found?"

""What are you getting at, Magnus?"

"Would you be glad of the services of a man who could enlighten you about these things?"

Bruce shrugged. "Who could?"

"Cliff could," said Magnus, calmly. "It was his discovery."

All eyes turned to Cliff. He picked up the photographs rather nervously and pointed out to them the small black dot. When Doran and Bruce had both examined it curiously, he said: "That thing is the eye of the Venusian. Like Cyclops, they're one-eyed—and they have an unusually small eye, at that. If they'd had a pair of eyes—

and larger ones—it would have been spotted before. Like myself, those men in the dome must sometimes have come across the larvæ of eels in the sea. Their refractive index is exactly that of sea-water, so they're completely transparent, absolutely invisible in water—apart from their eyes. All you can see of the larvæ is a pair of black eyes moving through the water, with apparently no tissue connecting them, no body attached."

"Of course, that's it," said Doran, quietly thumping his desk. "Go on, Cliff."

"Surface plankton is faintly blue rather than colourless, but that blueness in the blue sea-water also makes it quite invisible to us—and to fish. I've seen a hyperiid shrimp six inches long, quite strongly built, yet totally invisible in the water because of transparency. There's another species of shrimp called *Phronima* which also is invisible. And much bigger creatures, too—for instance, the squid *Bathothauma*, which has eyes on stalks like the decapod and—"

"That's enough, thanks—the point has been taken," said Doran, heading off the threatened lecture on marine biology. "The Venusian was a transparent sea-creature, invisible in water except for its eye. Of course, eyes must have visual purple in them and be dark, else they wouldn't be able to reflect and focus light and thereby see. The one and only place we can expect to find it on Venus must be in the lake, which therefore must be water. Do you think it's a large creature?"

"Fairly large, anyway," said Cliff. "The cables were being pulled from widely separated points simultaneously. It must have been big to cover all those points—or, at least, it must have been able to extend itself to those points."

"What do you mean by that, quite?" asked Bruce, his cadaverous face now showing an interest usually foreign to

it.

"My theory is that the Venusian form is something like that of an enormous amoeba, Like a great colourless jelly that can extend parts of itself in long arms, or streamers, and use them to exert force. Tremendous force, too. It tried to crack the dome open, and certainly dented it quite a bit. It's sizeable, and weighty, for we could see wide tracts of the EP plants being flattened by it as it moved. It must be able to change its shape considerably—for instance, it must have elongated itself to an eel-like form to have wormed its way in and out of the ship—the —˜conning tower' opening could only have been small. Incidentally, that single little window in the ship may have been for its single little eye. And it saw our submarine cross in front of it. Again, it's a slimy creature. Wherever it went, and on whatever it touched, it left a film of slime."

"H'm," said Doran. "I can understand why the vibrator beam failed to affect a gooey lump like that. It hadn't any solid, brittle parts to break."

"For the same reason," said Magnus, "it could stand up to the enormous acceleration of its ship on that rush journey from Moon to Earth, which no decapod or human could. A jelly can't very well be crushed to a jelly."

Doran frowned, "Then why is it returning to Venus at such slow acceleration?"'

Magnus stole a look at Cliff. "My theory is," he said, quietly, "it's taking it easy because it doesn't want to crush its passenger, Cliff's brother."

Bruce also looked at Cliff's strained face. "All right, young man, don't worry—you're coming with us. I think you've earned your passage."

Cliff cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said, and was still husky. He became aware of Doran regarding him calculatingly. Then Doran dropped his gaze to his own

buttonhole, and murmured: “The Venus expedition is largely an S.I.D. project. If you join it, that means you join the S.I.D.—you’ll have to sign on.”

Magnus jumped up. “You cunning old fox! I knew you’d be after him sooner or later. Don’t have any part of it, Cliff. He’ll have you by the short hairs for the next twenty years. I’ve warned you what it’s like. So tell him to go jump in the river.”

“Thanks, Magnus,” said Cliff, “but I made up my mind some time ago to try to join the S.I.D.”

Magnus threw up his hands in despair. “I, too, was young and ignorant like you. I, too, thought—”

“Quiet, grey-beard,” said Doran. “It’s Cliff’s business, not yours. Actually, we’re stretching a point—a big one—to accommodate him. We’ll pass you as a shrimp, Cliff, but you’re a long way from being a starbug. Why, you’ve only been to the Moon and back.”

“Which is more than you’ve done,” said Magnus, nastily.

“I realise that, sir,” said Cliff. “I intend to go all out to study space navigation and piloting and—”

“The best way to learn,” said Doran, “is by experience. I’m going to apprentice you, as it were, to a qualified spaceman. I appoint you, as from now, assistant to Martin Magnus—and may heaven have mercy on your soul!”

Magnus’s jaw dropped.

Cliff looked at him eagerly, hopefully, yet anxiously.

“I’ve often thought,” said Doran, idly, “that Magnus needed a sidekick, someone to unload his grief on, instead of keep trying to stuff it all through the Visi at me from all quarters of the solar system. Then perhaps he’ll let me sleep in my bed o’ nights. I hope you’re tough enough to take it, Cliff—for my sake.”

“We—we’ve rubbed along so far,” said Cliff,

awkwardly.

Magnus closed his mouth. Then suddenly he grinned and came over to Cliff with hand extended.

"Shake, pard," he said.

The spaceship *Archimedes* hang seemingly motionless over the dazzling white woolly cloud surface of Venus. But every now and then a jet of superheated steam rushed from its tail and kicked it to a new position in relation to that surface. It was in the last stages of juggling itself into an orbit above the cloud layer, in space, where it could match the speed of rotation of the planet and remain poised over one spot.

That spot lay a few miles laterally from the lake in the mountain bowl, which was hidden by the clouds from the human eye but visible with some show of detail on the big radar screen in the ship.

It had been a long and largely uneventful voyage from Earth, Cliff had spent the time cramming hard at astronautics, with the help of practical examples by Magnus in *Archimedes*' navigation room. But the practical demonstration which stuck most firmly in his memory was one which occurred by pure chance.

He'd been sitting in the little recreation room playing poker with Magnus when something like a brilliant arrow of fire zipped past his head—and vanished. But the bright line of its passage had scared itself upon the retina of his eyes and still appeared to hang there in the air. Then he became aware that the same air was moving gently past him, fanning his cheek like a zephyr.

Magnus rose nonchalantly to his feet, removing the big wet wad of chewing gum from his mouth, and jammed it over a tiny hole which had appeared in the curving wall beside them. The wad remained stuck there.

"That," said Magnus, "was a meteor. Just a small one

—not an eighth of an inch in diameter, I'd say. Few of 'em are ever larger. But it was big enough to get through the meteor bumper. Make a note of that trick with the gum. It serves as a darn good temporary patch—stops the air leak, It isn't just the stickiness that holds it there—there's fourteen pounds per square inch of air pressure jamming it against the wall. It'll do fine till a mechanic comes along and makes a proper seal. All spacemen don't have a habit of chewing gum just because they can't smoke. The gum can be put to other uses, you see,"

That was only one of a hundred useful wrinkles Cliff picked up on the trip. But that was when he, too, became a gum chewer.

Before the expedition started, there had been a long and sometimes hot discussion at the Burcau to decide whether *Archimedes* should now land direct on Venus, the scout-rocket being discarded altogether. For some people held that as it now seemed almost certain that the lake was water, then *Archimedes* could land, refuel from the lake, and take off again.

But Doran said the last word on it. "Yes, gentlemen, the lake is almost certainly water—but only 'almost.' Complete certainty eludes us. We know next to nothing of the organic structure of Venusians. Maybe they can live in water—and other liquids also. Quite apart from that question, it seems that in that lake dwell large, strong, and intelligent creatures, with scientific powers greater than our own—in some respects, anyhow. And by no means have they showed themselves friendly towards us. We can't risk their capturing *Archimedes* entire as a sample from Earth| You may laugh, but that task may well be within their powers. I vote that the two-man scout-rocket plan be retained. But, frankly, I shouldn't like to be one of the two men in that scout!"

Magnus stood up. “I should.”

Cliff stood up beside him. “That means me too.”

Doran looked at Bruce. Bruce nodded.

And Martin Magnus and Clifford Page were nominated the first two men to attempt to set foot on Venus.

So now, when “*Archimedes* had settled finally into its orbit, the small rocket, containing Magnus and Cliff, sprang away from its nose on a gush of compressed air and drifted a respectable distance from the parent ship. Although neither ship appeared to be moving in relation to Venus, actually they were both rushing tail-first around the same satellite orbit at something like five miles per second.

Then the scout-ship began to jet steam, As it was moving tail-first, this braked its speed. It fell below orbital velocity, and the gravity of Venus began to pull it down. And down it went in a steep curve towards the clouds, towards the lake below them.

Beckworth Bruce watched it on *Archimedes*’ great radar screen, followed its path through the clouds. Magnus’s voice came intermittently through the radio speaker at his elbow.

“Clouds, clouds all the way. The radar’s our only eye. The TV camera can’t show us anything but clouds—and we can’t switch to another programme. My guess is that the darn things reach right down to the ground... Braking again. I don’t trust the radar altimeter—too much margin for error... Down, down, down... Would the fall sever come to an end? Do cats eat bats? Do bats eat cats?”

Bruce raised his head sharply. “He’s raving!” he said, astonished.

“No, he’s only quoting Alice ix Wonderland,” said his Captain.

Bruce grunted. He’d never wasted any time reading mere fiction.

“We must be near the bottom of the well,” said the voice from the speaker. “I think I can sec—”

There was a click, ending the sound of the carrier wave.

“His mike’s gone,” said Captain Browne.

Bruce looked carefully at the screen. ““They’ve landed,” he said. “On the edge of the lake.”

He lifted his own mike and called Magnus many times. But no reply came.

The Captain said: “Maybe their radio’s conked out altogether.”

“Yes. And maybe they’ve killed themselves. Maybe the Venusians have got ’em. Or maybe they’re just making a cup of tea,” growled Bruce. “Whatever it is, we’re going to be in a spot if we don’t hear from them. How shall we know if it’s sate to land?”

The Captain answered only in his private mind. He thought: “We’ll know it damn well won’t be!”

• • •

In actual fact the occupants of the scout-rocket were not preparing tea at that particular time, but each would have been glad of a cup—and an aspirin to go with it. For they both had headaches, Cliff had a bump on his forehead the size of a molehill and almost as green. Magnus’s beak-like nose was gashed.

The shock-absorber legs had done their best to soak up the impact, but the jar had been considerable and shaken the two men like dice in a box.

“Practical demonstration number twenty-three, Cliff: how not to land a rocket-ship,” said Magnus, a trifle bitterly, as he analysed a sample of atmosphere.

“Not your fault, considering the ceiling’s zero and the altimeter is all of a hundred feet out,” said Cliff.

“Seasoned spacemen pilot by instinct, not instruments. My mind must have been wandering... However, the sampler rocket did its job properly, at least: this sample’s the same exactly. There’s breathable air outside at a comfortable pressure. No spacesuits needed. Wish I could get a report through to Baldy.”

Magnus took another look at the transmitting side of the radio set, and then shook his head hopelessly over it. A heavy cylinder of compressed oxygen, jolted loose by the crash landing, had driven its nozzle right through that part of the set. It would take a couple of days’ work with a soldering iron to straighten out the mess.

But he’d patched up the receiving side, and at intervals they heard Bruce calling them.

“Okay,” said Magnus. “Let’s go out for a walk.”

Cliff took a deep breath, and tried to appear casual as he got up. His head throbbed.

Magnus opened the double doors of the airlock; there was no need to trouble about pressurizing it. They looked out at Venus.

It was not exciting. They might have been peering from a crofter’s cottage beside a loch on a dismal day in the Highlands. A sort of Scotch mist drifted around—the bottom of the immense cloud layer above them. Sometimes a squirt of the prevailing wind found its way into the mountain bow! and drove a hole in the mist. And then one glimpsed the steep mountain slopes, thick with tall green bushes, and the dull expanse of the lake itself, momentarily ruffled. There was dark sand all along the margin of the lake, and, like everything else, it looked damp.

The light was poor indeed. Although they were twenty-six million miles nearer the sun than they’d been on Earth, the clouds absorbed all the extra sunlight—and a deal more. On Venus it could never be brighter than the darkest

winter day on Earth.

But it was near tropically warm. Such heat from the sun which did percolate was trapped under the blanketing layers of carbon dioxide high above, and if it weren't for the prevailing wind the atmosphere would have been unbearably stifling.

So far as they could see, no animal life was stirring, if it existed. The bushes were hung with their own peculiar fruit, which looked like bunches of white grapes, but no birds came to peck at it. The leaden lake looked almost inimical to life. If there were fish in it, they kept away from the surface. But somehow it was hard to imagine ordinary fish existing in it.

On the other hand, it was only too easy to visualize great masses of colourless protoplasm oozing about in those dark depths. What baffled the imagination completely was the kind of life those enigmatic monsters led down there, how they made their spaceships, what beliefs they held, what motivated their existence.

If they were down there.

Magnus stood aside. "Clifford Page, Esquire, you may have the honour of being the first man to set foot on the planet Venus."

"Oh, no—let's toss for it."

Magnus waved away the suggestion. "Fanfares of trumpets don't mean anything to these old bones any more. I'm quite blasé. But if it thrills you, by all means step right out."

It did give Cliff a certain thrill to feel his foot touch that sandy soil, but at this time his concern for Ken made all other feelings secondary. His hopes of Ken's survival had faded sadly during the months in *Archimedes*. It seemed unlikely that the Venusians could have kept Ken alive all this time, even if they were concerned enough to try. Be he

alive or dead, Cliff felt sick at the thought of what his brother must have endured in such keeping.

Then Magnus startled him out of his melancholy reflections by slamming the steel door with a clang and dropping beside him.

"I think the best plan," said Magnus, "is to explore the verge of the lake—walk right round it, if necessary. The days are only twelve hours long here, but I calculate there are a good eight hours left of this one—plenty of time to complete the circuit before dusk."

Cliff nodded, relievedly. It was not impossible that Ken was being held captive at some point on the lakeside. In any case, if there were any clue to his whereabouts, it would most likely be somewhere near the lake.

But first they took a sample of the lake. It was pure, fresh water.

"Well!" said Magnus, and seemed to think that was sufficient comment.

They started out.

"I've brought some chocolate along," said Magnus, presently. "And these."

He produced a couple of cigars. Cliff was glad to light one —it helped to soothe his edginess.

"This is the first time I've hit a new planet and been able to smoke," said Magnus. But for all his airiness, his eyes were missing no detail of their surroundings as they walked. Cliff, too, kept ceaseless watch on the lake and the bushy slopes—what the mist allowed him to see of them.

"Seems to be all much of a muchness," said Magnus, after an hour of solid plodding. "All the same, don't walk too near the lake, Cliff. I don't think the Venusians ever crawl out of the water—we'd surely have come across some slimy traces if they did—but quite possibly they could whip a streamer of goo out and grab your ankle."

"You're right," said Cliff, veering away from the bank. "But we're pretty safe on the land. I'm quite sure they'd be helpless without water to buoy them up. Without it, they'd just collapse into a sort of enormous pancake. Hey—what are those marks?"

To their right, beyond the sand Strip, there was an irregular pattern of deep indentations and grooves in the loamy ground. Magnus studied it. Almost at once he said: "This is where our sampler rocket landed. You can still see something of the tracks of the drums,"

He measured with his eye the distance to the lake's edge. "H'm. The pipe should have reached the lake and sucked up water, all right. The Venusians must have been on to the thing as soon as it landed—grabbed the pipe, blocked it, held it till they'd prepared their thought-rod, and popped that through instead. And, incidentally, prepared their own spaceship for take-off."

"If they grabbed the pipe," said Cliff, "they could have pulled the whole rocket into the water."

"Sure. But then they'd never learn who sent it. They let it go so that they—or one of °em—could follow it and find out. He followed it nearly to the Moon, and closely too—must be near-sighted in that one peeper of his! But there were no lakes, no water visible on the Moon. He would have been unable to move outside his ship if it landed there. But there was the Earth, only next door, so to speak, three-quarters covered with water. So he chose that for his base for investigation. Anyhow, that's how I figure it."

"TI guess you're not far wrong," said Cliff. "But if they were aware of the sampler landing just as soon as it did so, what's the chances they were equally smart about our scout?"

"Ten to one on, I'd say. They're probably watching us from just under that murky water there. But I think the

scout's plenty far enough away from the verge to be out of their reach."

"I hope so," said Cliff, for the rocket had for a long time now been lost in the mist behind them. "But I think we'd better try for the track record round this circuit."

They walked on quickly, looking this way and that, but with a growing feeling—which might have been imagination—of being silently watched from the lake.

During the next hour their conversation revolved around Venus and the Venusians.

They discussed the peculiar climate without coming to any real conclusions about it. The lower stratum, at least, of the clouds was water vapour. It was understandable how it kept the ground moist, or vice versa, but that this small lake appeased to be the only open water on Venus was inexplicable. The mountain ring formation was unique, and maybe that had something to do with it.

They wondered what sort of country lay beyond the mountains, and if it were inhabited and by what—or whom?

As Magnus pointed out, they couldn't get an idea of the planet as a whole from this one limited area. Analogously, what could the Venusian have learnt about Earth and the nature and achievements of man from that one spot beneath the sea off Malacante?

They discussed whether until the sampler rocket landed the Venusians even guessed there were other worlds above the clouds. Yet, as Cliff said, surely they must have known, for they had spaceships superior to man's.

"It looks to me," said Magnus, "that they're the kind of people we don't get in Bermondsey—the sort who never speak to their neighbours, who 'keep themselves to themselves,' as they put it, until the neighbours start barging in on them. As we did. And as we have again. I

half expect another thought-rod to come hurtling at us from the lake, saying 'No Hawkers, No Circulars, Beware of the Dog.' "

Cliff laughed, and then stopped laughing very suddenly. For he saw some more marks on the ground just ahead, some on the loam, some on the sand. And these had not been made by any rocket.

They were footprints, and made by bare, five-toed feet.

He seemed to go hot and cold. Ken?

But when he had a closer look, that hope was killed.

"Look at that big toe!"commented Magnus. "It sticks out practically at right-angles. Prehensile feet made these prints—tree-dwelling creatures. Bipeds, obviously. Man-like, probably, but very primitive indeed. At least half ape. But it's an epoch-making discovery, none the less, Venus doesn't belong only to intelligent overblown amoeba! It looks as though the seed of man is here too."

Cliff's hand stole to the needle pistol at his hip. Then he noticed Magnus frown at him, and guiltily drew his hand back.

"That," said Magnus, reprovingly, "is scarcely the way to make friends and influence people."

Cliff was defensive. "Well, I'm willing to give 'em a chance to be chummy, but—prehistoric man!"

"Prehistoric man on Earth, so far as we can tell, lived a deal more peaceably with his neighbours than the bulk of his so-called civilized descendants," said Magnus, "Look, there's another whole bunch of prints over there. The creatures seem to come down from the mountains to get water here, Let's move on—we might meet some."

But they went for miles, and never met any. Neither did they see any more prints, They finished the chocolate and became hungry again.

Magnus picked a bunch of the big white berries and

eyed it speculatively. “Wonder if these are good to eat? Better not risk colic now, though. I’ll take it back as a sample.”He placed it carefully in a canister, slung on a strap.

After another mile of the same monotonous landscape, Magnus said: Red my reckoning, we’re nearing the end of the tour. Should be sighting the scout soon. We can’t miss it... Do you notice a strange sort of tang in the air?”

“Yes, It’s making my eyes water. It seems to be getting stronger. Where’s it coming from?”

Magnus shrugged to indicate he didn’t know.

A couple of minutes later they saw the tall slim shape of the scout-rocket standing in the mist. In one way Cliff was glad to see it again. In another the sight saddened him, for it meant that they had circumambulated the whole lake and failed to find a single trace of Ken.

The next move would have to be to sound the lake itself —and heaven alone knew what that might stir up.

They walked under the scout’s splayed, spidery absorber-legs, gazing up at the smooth sheen of the hull. Then they both stopped short, looked at each other, then up again at the door at the top of the short ladder.

Cliff recalled Magnus slamming that door shut. Now it stood wide open. The old hope stirred again to life. Had Ken found them?

“We’ve had a visitor,” whispered Magnus. He pointed to the round, and again Cliff was crushed by disappointment. A set of the now familiar ape-man footprints led to the bottom of the ladder. Another set led away at an angle into the bushes.

“Only one of them,” said Magnus. “He came, found no one at home, and went off again. Hope he didn’t do any damage in there. But maybe he called to fix the radio. I’d better go up and take a look.”

He climbed the ladder and disappeared into the ship.

Cliff waited below. He felt dull, empty, and hardly curious about the prints. He had journeyed so far, waited so long, and still there was no sign that his efforts might be rewarded.

The line of fruit-hung bushes stood motionless, and nothing moved among them.

Quite idly, without any real purpose, he followed the trail of prints which departed into the bushes at a point some twenty yards off. He certainly did not intend to follow them into the undergrowth.

Just before he reached that point, he glimpsed from the corner of his eye something leap from the line of bushes behind him. He spun round with a gasp.

Between him and the ship stood the ape-man, hunched, but as tall as he. It was naked and incredibly hairy, with great hard lumpy muscles. It stood with crooked feet wide apart, and gnarled hands held before it. Its face frightened him. The bloodshot eyes looked wild and murderous. Bony ridges bulged over them and there was scarcely any forehead between them and the shock of black, unkempt scalp hair. The creature was panting, its mouth gaping. The long white eye-teeth protruded, sharp as daggers.

Instinctively, he clapped his hand to his pistol.

At once the creature was upon him, pinioning him in a grip of steel. The loud, harsh breathing sounded in his very ear.

"Help!" bawled Cliff, fear running through him like an electric shock.

The grip moved up to his throat, closed around it.

Over one muscular shoulder he saw, through pain-closing eyes, Magnus appear in the ship's doorway, his queer rifle levelled.

There was a faint pop.

Then everything seemed to swirl around him. He felt he was being drawn into an inky whirlpool, suffocating... And then he felt nothing at all.

9

THE WAY BACK

IT seemed an age had passed before the world of sensation gradually grew again into being around Cliff Page. His nostrils started to prickle maddeningly. He sneezed, and startled himself into reasonable consciousness.

He sat up slowly.

Magnus was squatting beside him, looking anxious. His eyes were red-rimmed.

"Feeling better?"he asked.

Cliff nodded. He noticed his forearm had been bared and there was a small bead of blood on it.

"Hypodermic,"explained Magnus. "I gave you a shot of my antidote. Otherwise you'd be out cold for another couple of hours yet—like him."

Cliff looked where Magnus pointed. The ape-man sprawled there on his back, still as death.

"My rifle is a humane weapon," said Magnus. "It fires thin plastic grenades of knock-out gas. Sorry I had to knock you out too, but if you insist on trying to waltz with ape-men—"

"Waltz!" said Cliff, feeling his stiff neck. Then he sneezed again, "That darn gas of yours has got right up my nose."

"It isn't my gas. And it's getting up my nose too. I've been crying like a baby. It's getting worse. It's coming off the lake. The Venusians are up to something and I don't like it a bit."

Cliff got to his feet, and took a deep breath, He regretted it at once. His lungs seemed to burn.

"It's an acid gas!" he choked.

"Yes," said Magnus. "And if it gets any more concentrated, it'll kill us."

He went over and poked a foot of the metal barrel of his gun into the lake and held it there a minute. Then he came back hurriedly.

"Phew! It's strong over there." He held up the gun barrel for inspection. "Look, it's pitted over. That's no longer water in the lake—it's concentrated acid! It's not sulphuric or nitric. Don't know what it is, but it's unnaturally light and floats on top of the water. It's half gas already—volatile in the extreme. We can't stand it for much longer. Let's get back in the ship."

"What about him?"

Magnus paused. "After he tried to strangle you? But you're right—we can't leave him here, It would be deliberate murder. Can you give me a hand?"

Together they dragged the unconscious ape-man to the ship, got him up the ladder somehow, and heaved him into the cabin. The effort exhausted them utterly. The pungent invisible gas was fast becoming a blistering agony. It was a boon to be able to shut it out. Magnus played weakly with air-conditioning apparatus and the cylinder of oxygen, and contrived to get the air in the cabin more or less pure again. After that, they soon revived.

"What must they be thinking about us up there after all this time?" said Magnus, and flipped on the radio.

After a few minutes' silence, Beckworth Bruce's voice said: "Hello, Magnus and Page. I'm repeating this message at ten-minute intervals. We don't know what's happened to you or why we haven't heard from you. But we can still see the scout down there. If we don't hear from you within

one hour from now, we're coming down. Thete's a wide flat area to the south of the lake. Get as far away from it as you can—I shall land *Archimedes* there. We'll just have to take a chance that the lake is water. If it isn't, of course, we're sunk—we'll never get off Venus. That's all in the game. We can't go back empty-handed and not having learnt a thing after coming all this way. I shall repeat this message in ten minutes."

"Lord!" said Clif. "If they pump that stuff into their tanks, they won't have any tanks after five minutes."

"Only too true," said Magnus. He took a sample of the exterior atmosphere and tested it. "It's really thick now, If we'd left Tarzan here out in it, he'd be a goner by now."

"We'd be goners, too, if this happened when we were on the other side of the lake. What do you make of it, Magnus? Is it really the Venusians, or just some natural phenomenon?"

"It's too nicely timed to be anything other than the Venusians, I'd say. Maybe they deliberately tried to gas us, kill us. Maybe they're only trying to drive us away and seal the entrance to their world' I think they're pumping the stuff up from below. But I'll bet they're keeping well away from it themselves. They don't intend to let us have any of that water. —˜Their world is their world,' eh? They're welcome to it. This mountain bowl is becoming a pool of poison gas. Wish we could warn Baldy."

"The only way to warn him is to go back up there," said Cliff, quietly, looking down at the still inert ape-man.

Magnus busied himself opening a new packet of gum. "You know we couldn't come back here, don't you? There's no water to spare for a second return trip."

"I know. But do you honestly think Ken is still alive—out there, where it's death to be in the lake or out of it? Frankly, after seeing what I have seen of this horrible

place, I believe more than ever that he was dead long before we arrived. Now that it's come to this, I can only hope that he was."

Magnus chewed almost viciously. "Yes, Cliff, the chances are slim. But I think they still exist. I vote we hang on and see if this stuff clears."

The ape-man groaned, but still did not move.

"He's a tough customer," Magnus commented. "Last time I dosed a gorilla with that dope there wasn't a peep out of him for ninety minutes. We'd better tie him up—this is no place to start a rough-house."'

They bound the ape-man hand and foot with thick wire. He was no beauty. His skin was as rough and coarse as sandpaper.

By the time they had finished, Bruce had repeated his radio message twice. There was half an hour left before he would attempt to land *Archimedes*.

"We'd better go," said Cliff, steadily.

Magnus's only answer was a fulmination against Venusians of any size, shape or form. He tested a further sample of the atmosphere.

Then he said: "I hate to admit defeat. But we've got to get out of here, not just for our own sakes, but for the crowd in *Archimedes*. The gas is so concentrated now it's approaching the potency of the liquid form. Already it must be eating away the edges of the vent and the tail-fins. We'll be lucky to take off without a crash. If *Archimedes* lands in this, it'll never be spaceworthy again. They'll all have had it."

For answer, Cliff climbed into his bunk and settled himself to withstand the drag of take-off. Magnus eyed him soberly for a moment, then lowered himself slowly on to the pilot's couch.

"Stand by," he said. "Now..."

He pressed the firing button. The pumps throbbed, the motor began to roar. Slowly at first the scout began to rise. Then it gathered speed, fighting the gravity which hated to let go of them, and which they could fee! dragging at them.

An unusual swaying motion started, became unpleasantly noticeable and then quite violent. Magnus, watching the dials like a hawk, compressed his lips and reached for the knobs marked "Gyro A" and "Gyro B." It was as if the ship were being buffeted by a full gale.

The cause, as they found later, was that the vent had become so corroded by acid that in some places the steam burst through in side-jets, unequally matched. Most pilots would have lost control altogether.

But Magnus, by some magical apprehension of resultant forces, delicately tilted the two gyros to regain the ship's exact balance. The passage became smooth.

Then the scout was through the clouds, and the TV screen became a sunlit square. It darkened slowly to blue, then ever darker blue, until faint stars appeared in it. They were at the atmosphere's edge. Very soon they were into starry space itself, approaching the orbit of *Archimedes*.

The scout achieved orbital velocity, and the strain fell away.

Bruce obviously had been watching them and waiting for this moment when they could relax for a bit. His ironical voice spoke from the radio: "Nice to see you back, boys. But why haven't you been speaking to me?" He added, with unconscious humour: "Has something been eating you?"

He had to wait for the answer until Magnus had juggled the scout back on to the nose of *Archimedes* and dragged the semi-conscious prisoner through the lock into the parent ship.

Then he got all the other answers too. They took a long

time to tell, and Bruce took a long time to consider them.

"Much as I dislike the idea, I'm afraid I shall have to refer this back to Doran for decision," he said, finally. "Up till now I've made my own decisions. If I could do so now, I'd land *Archimedes* in some other part of Venus and chance finding the propellant to get off again. Who knows? —we might find water if we drilled for it. But Doran would never forgive me if we didn't,"

He radioed back to Doran, whose answering voice, weak and faded though it was through a crackle of static, was none the less emphatic.

"Bring the ship back, Baldy. We'll start building another right away that will be able to land and take off. I'll be half ready for you by the time you get back—I'll make 'em sweat blood on it. I don't mind losing *Archimedes*, but I'm darned if I'm going to risk losing a lot of my best men all in one go—you, Captain Browne, Magnus, and the Page lad. By the way, tell the boy how sorry I am he didn't find his brother. I can see those wretched Venusians piling up a whole heap of headaches for us in the future. Maybe we can win over the ape-men as our allies—at least, they're nearer to our kind in the scheme of things. Get Magnus to work on that specimen he captured. He's good at picking up lingoes quickly. He may get some useful information out of him. At least he might know what the things did with Kenneth Page. He might even know a little of what goes on in that confounded tarn. Pump him."

Within an hour of that message being received, a mighty jet of steam burst from *Archimedes*' tail and drove her out of the orbit, away from Venus. The acid-pitted scout-rocket had previously been pushed adrift, abandoned. Its use was over and there was no sense in wasting precious propellant to carry unnecessary dead weight.

Cliff stood by a TV screen, watching the planet's great

bulk slowly receding. Under its cloud canopy it still concealed countless secrets, but there was only one for whose answer he yearned. Would he ever learn what happened to Ken?

It was as if Magnus could hear the question he was asking himself. He put an arm about Cliff's shoulders. "Bear up, son. We'll be back there again, in a couple of years, maybe. Then we'll get to the bottom of it even if it means ripping the planet apart. Next time, we'll have some answers ready for our acidulous friends and show 'em we can be nasty, too, if we choose. Maybe they'll be glad to co-operate after that."

Cliff forced a smile.

For the next couple of weeks he tried to forget by plunging himself back in his study of astronautics. Magnus didn't help as much as on the outward trip, for he spent a good deal of time closeted with the ape-man in the steel cell in which the creature had been confined for the safety of all. The strength of "Tarzan" (the name had stuck) was enormous and they were forced to keep him chained.

Magnus set out to obey Doran's instructions and "learn the lingo." With a tape-recorder, a pad and pencil, he sat day after day in Tarzan's cell, trying to form a pattern of sense from the uncouth growls and snarls with which the ape-man responded to his overtures. Cliff accompanied him for the first three sessions, but was bored most of the time (for Magnus seemed to be getting nowhere) and repelled for all of it. The sight of those bloodshot eyes and fearsome teeth kept stimulating bad dreams of that awful moment on Venus when the hairy brute attacked him.

He was depressed enough as it was, without reminding himself of such unpleasantness. So he concentrated on his studies and let Magnus go it alone.

Nobody had any notion of the ape-man's natural diet,

but it was a surprise to find that he was no meat-eater. He would not touch meat in any form, But he relished fruit and vegetables, including even the dull vegetable plankton preparations.

Yet after a time it appeared that Earth-food lacked some vitamins necessary to him. He began to ail. The ship's doctor visited him daily, experimenting to remedy the diet deficiency.

One whole day Cliff didn't see Magnus at all, and heard only the next morning that Magnus was ill also. He went at once to Magnus's tiny cabin. Magnus lay in his bunk looking pale. He was in need of a shave, which was unusual for him: he was meticulous about his toilet.

He smiled wearily: "Hello, son."

"I hear you're under the weather."

"*Pro tem*. But I'm feeling better today. Think I'll get up for lunch."

"Anything I can get you?"

"No, thanks, Cliff—I'll be all right."

"How's Tarzan?"

"He's been seedy too, but the doc tells me he shows signs of pulling round—he's with him now."

"I suppose you still haven't had any luck in getting anything out of him?"

Magnus regarded Cliff silently for a moment. He seemed to be considering something and yet endeavouring to keep all expression from his face. He said in an oddly wooden way: "On the contrary, I've had a few bits of interesting information from him."

Cliff was surprised, but tried not to sound too eager when he asked: "Anything about Ken?"

"Yes."

Cliffs restraint slipped away. "Oh, what?—please," he beseeched.

Magnus smiled sympathetically. “Cliff, I’ll tell you this to save you worrying your head off. It may turn out to be good news. But it’s incomplete yet. I want to make quite sure, one way or the other, before I tell you any more. Your hopes about Ken have been dashed every blessed time in the past. I didn’t want it to happen again, and I still don’t. I’m having another session with Tarzan this afternoon—but alone, I insist. Call again this evening around nineteen hundred hours and then—but we must keep our fingers crossed about it—I hope I’ll have something for you.”

All afternoon Cliff tried to force his mind to attend to plotting specimen navigational orbits, but his pile of graph paper remained largely virgin.

Five minutes before time he pushed open the door of Magnus’s cabin, on edge with anticipation—and apprehension.

Magnus appeared to be asleep now, his blankets drawn up to his ears, his head buried deep in his pillow.

Cliff walked over to the bunk. “Magnus!” But there was no answer. Gently, he shook the occupant’s shoulder. The man in the bunk sighed and rolled half over, on to his back, still asleep.

When Cliff saw his face, he grabbed at the head of the bunk for support, for he had come nearer to fainting than ever before in his life.

For the sleeper was not Magnus, but his own brother, Ken.

As he leaned there, stunned, Magnus came in.

“Why, Cliff,” he said, “I expected to be here when you came. You must have had a shock.”

“Is he all right?” Cliff whispered.

“The doc says so—now. But he was pretty sick during the metamorphosis.”

“M-metamorphosis?”

Magnus said: “Look, Cliff, this is going to be a tough one to take, but it’s gospel truth. There are more things in Venus and Earth... Months before we got there, the Venusians abandoned Ken on the lakeside—apparently quite naked, though that didn’t matter: it was warm enough. I presume they’d finished with him—got all they wanted from him. Maybe, too, they were having trouble procuring suitable food for him, for heaven knows what they feed on. But he had to eat, and all there was to eat was that white grapelike fruit. Just what organic substances the juice of that fruit contains any bio-chemist would give his eye-teeth to discover. And believe me, he’d have some eye-teeth to give if he’d sampled that juice! It must have been one of the ingredients in that cocktail Dr Jekyll whipped up.”

Cliff just stared at Magnus, utterly lost. And then, all of a sudden he guessed what Magnus was driving at. It made him feel weak. It defied belief.

“You can’t mean Ken became Tarzan?” Incredulity made his voice sound as cracked and uncertain as Magnus’s.

Magnus nodded. “Believe it or not. I know it’s so. I had a dose of it—a mild one. Yesterday I ate some of that fruit —only about half of that bunch I brought back. It made me ill. But I had to experiment. You see, Tarzan’s slowly been losing the prehistoric man characteristics for a whole week now, reverting to his normal self. It was amazing to watch, stage by stage. There’s scarcely a trace left now. When I saw a facial resemblance to you beginning to show, I knew who it was. But a body can’t lose all that strength, have all that muscular tissue waste, without suffering. He became really sick. What worried me a lot was whether he would remain mentally sick also. He was rambling, and sometimes raving. It was terrible. I didn’t want you to

know of it till the outcome became clear, one way or the other. You were spared that worry, and you don't have to start worrying now. He's okay. He's your brother again, exhausted—but sane."

Cliff stood looking at Ken for a while. Then he muttered: "Thanks, Magnus. I'm glad I didn't know about it. But what caused him to change back?"

"Pretty obviously the return to a normal diet. His glands were no longer being primed with that deadly stuff. It must be about the most powerful drug in existence. Atavists, throwbacks to our early ancestors, still occasionally crop up on Earth. Glandular disorder is the root cause. But I've never seen anything like—that. I don't want to again. Just to make sure the fruit was the cause, I ate some. Tasted fine. But within a couple of hours my hair had coarsened and my skin became rough. I didn't develop any more muscles that I could count, but I kept getting wild impulses to use what I had—against other people. So I locked myself in for the day. Don't get scared—I'm normal now, except that I've shaved twice today and still have a stubble."

Kenneth Page began to mumble. His eyes were still closed.

Instantly, Magnus switched on the tape-recorder and held the microphone close to the sleeper's lips.

"... light too strong... light too strong... four thousand million of them, white, black, brown, or yellow... the water stings and stings unbearably... the power of atoms smashing atoms, of heated water, action and reaction... the satellite and the fourth planet from the sun... no world for us... this metal hemisphere is too strong... the light is too strong... too strong..."

The murmuring died away, and though for a space Ken's lips still moved no sound could be heard from them.

Magnus switched off. “Nothing new there. Got it all on the tape before, several times. I’ve got a whole reel of stuff. I’ll play it back to you later.”

“Is it all like that?”

“More or less, though some parts are quite coherent, I’ve been able to piece together something of a story from them, though it was like doing a crossword puzzle when some of the clues are puns in Arabic.”

“I’m afraid most of what Ken said was Arabic to me,” said Cliff.

“It becomes easier once you’ve realized that some of the memories he’s mulling over in his dreams are his own —and some are the Venusian’s.”

“How on earth—?”

“Early this afternoon Ken was awake—weak but quite lucid. His conscious memories of what happened to him are few. He remembers patrolling the sea-bed alone at Malacante, and suddenly being pinioned, helpless, by something he couldn’t see. And then being dragged down into the darkness. But he recalls nothing after that until he awoke beside the Venusian lake. He was lying on the sand with no idea how he got there. He was desperately hungry. He tried the fruit—ate several bunches of it. Then he seemed to get delirious. He lived in a dark nightmare. He’s only just come out of it. He’s had a tough time.”

“Poor old Ken! Thank heavens it’s over. I suppose all of those footprints we saw were his?”

“We can only presume so,” said Magnus. “He can’t recall seeing any other living thing. Nor, so far, has any mention of such an encounter cropped up in the subconscious ramblings I’ve recorded. The impressions of the Venusian’s thoughts and feelings he retains are all subconscious. The ‘light too strong’ refrain runs right through them. You know that in space—or even on the

Moon—our eyes, used to Earth's atmospheric shield, can't stand the naked sunlight. The ultra-violet waves hurt them abominably and would blind them in time. That's analogous with the Venusian, used to the gloomy lake on dim-lit Venus, trying to face the glare of our ultra-violet lamps."

"Of course," said Cliff.

[*Final page missing*]

THE END

Editor's Note:

The story continues in the next volume of the trilogy when Magnus resumes his exploration of the mysterious planet.

Martin Magnus will return in '*Martin Magnus on Venus*' and '*Martin Magnus on Mars*'.

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